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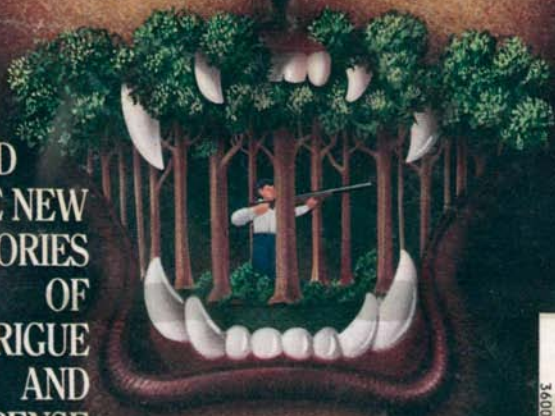


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by Doug Allyn

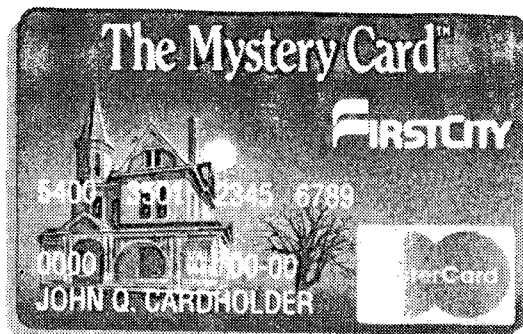
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COVER BY THEO RUĐNAK

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

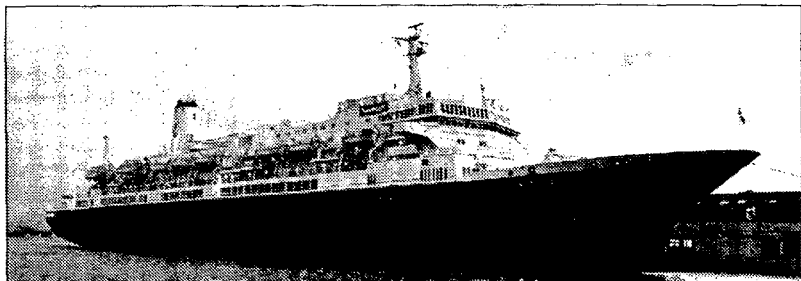
A real bear or a ghostly bear? A question that arises in Doug Allyn's "Cannibal," our cover story. Which is not inappropriate for the season; All Hallows Eve is on the horizon, with its complement of ghosts and witches and other fearsome things. Hence, you will find in some of the stories in this issue, an assortment of their compatriots, as we often try to do at this time of year. There is something unearthly, for instance, in Archie V. Taylor's "The Deer," while Richard F. McGonegal puts on a Halloween party for us in "The Grin Reaper," with guess-who as a guest. (And then there's the *other* guest.) A departed husband is a very real presence in Esther J. Holt's "Ainsley." And finally we get to take a close look at an ancient

symbol in Robert W. Chambers' "The Seal of Solomon Cipher," our Mystery Classic.

For bringing the latter to our attention, we are indebted to Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh, editors of a new anthology titled *Tales of the Occult* (Prometheus Books). Among its collection of stories about everything from doppelgangers to astrology, by such authors as H. G. Wells, Kipling, and Conan Doyle, and including more recent writers like Ray Bradbury, Helen McCloy, and Avram Davidson, we came upon this tale from the annals of Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons. Some of you, of course, will remember Mr. Keen from his radio days; the original volume, called *The Tracer of Lost Persons*, was published in 1906.

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A Better —Chess— —Player

A large, detailed illustration of a hand holding a chess piece, specifically a king, is positioned in the upper right. The background of the entire page is a black and white illustration of a prison compound. It features a high electrified fence topped with barbed wire, a guard tower with a searchlight, and a guard standing on the fence. A bird is flying in the sky above the compound.

—by—
Kenneth
—Gavrell

The penal compound stood on acres of cleared field at the edge of the jungle. It was enclosed by a high electrified fence topped with barbed wire. At fifty yard intervals along the fence were guard towers with powerful searchlights and always-loaded machine guns. At night the compound was floodlit so that it was almost as bright as day. Nearly all of the prisoners, many of them very intelligent men, were there for political reasons, but in the eight years of its existence, no one had ever escaped the compound. It was thought that sprinkled among the prisoners were paid informants who immediately reported any escape plan they heard of to the colonel.

Colonel Buko was a tall, heavyset, well-muscled man of forty-two. He had a shaved head, a black mustache, and skin the color of burlap. Immediately after taking command of the compound (shortly after its inception) he had had a sign erected over the entrance. The sign read ABANDON HOPE ALL YOU WHO ENTER HERE. Dante's *Inferno* was one of Colonel Buko's favorite books. The colonel had read widely; he also liked Celine, Dostoevski, and Yukio Mishima. He was an expert in chess and most other board games. With such interests, Colonel Buko did not much mind the steamy heat in which he passed his days at the isolated penal camp. Occasionally he found an opportunity to mitigate his boredom by an unusual act of cruelty. Perhaps he got some of his ideas from Dante.

On the day Gorshin was brought through the gates of the camp he vowed to escape. A short, dark, wiry man in his thirties, Gorshin was a university professor with a specialization in Middle Eastern literature. He had been arrested for his political ideas. As in most such cases, his sentence was for an unspecified duration. Gorshin assumed that if the present government remained in power, he would spend the rest of his life in Colonel Buko's inferno.

From the day of Gorshin's arrival, Colonel Buko seemed to take a special interest in him. Both men were readers and both played chess. The colonel ascertained these facts at their first interview and invited Gorshin to a game that evening after food call and before lights out. Gorshin disliked the colonel at first sight, but he showed up at the designated time.

Colonel Buko won the first game in six minutes. Gorshin had never seen so good a player. The second victory took Colonel Buko almost twelve minutes.

"You don't play very well for a college professor."

"I always thought I did."

"Do you want some rice wine?"

"No, thank you."

The colonel refilled his own cup. "A man who cannot win at chess should not become involved in politics," he said.

"Are you interested in politics?" Gorshin asked.

"If you live in this country, you must be interested in politics. I helped put the present government in power."

"And this is how they rewarded you?" Gorshin said, sweeping his hand to indicate the sweaty compound beyond the mosquito screens.

The colonel emptied his cup. "I enjoy my work," he said.

"Why?"

"I enjoy power. In this compound, I have absolute power."

"Have you ever had anyone escape?" Gorshin asked matter-of-factly.

"No one. Several have tried. If I hear even a rumor of an escape plan, I have the perpetrators shot immediately."

"Without proof that the rumor is true?"

"Proof is not important here."

"Nor is life, I take it."

"Fewer vermin crawling on the face of the earth," Colonel Buko said.

They played a third game of chess. The colonel won that also. Gorshin got up to leave.

"You will be locked in at nine o'clock," the colonel said, "until exercise call at five tomorrow morning."

The professor nodded and said good night.

"If I were you, I would not think of escaping," Colonel Buko said. "It's as bright as day out there. We have two guards in each tower, plus two at the gate, two at the electric station, and four more who patrol the compound. All are equipped with automatic weapons, and all are very familiar with those weapons. I have seen to that."

"I wouldn't dream of leaving you before I win a chess game," the professor said.

He walked back across the yard to Hut 4, where he bunked with five other men. At nine o'clock sharp he heard the padlocking of the quonset hut's metal door and the interior lights suddenly went out. Gorshin lay on his bunk, which smelled of mold, and looked out the barred windows at the two guards in the tower twenty yards away. They leaned on their machine guns, looking bored.

Gorshin was not much interested in his hut-mates. Two were students who had barely begun to shave, one was a former civil servant who Gorshin soon learned was as corrupt as those who had replaced him, one was a common and incorrigible thief, and the fifth an army major who had chosen the wrong side eight years earlier. Only the last, whose name was Rozazi, held the slightest interest for Gorshin. He slept in the bunk directly below, and Gorshin would sometimes talk to him between lights out and the coming of sleep.

The major was a man of ideals. He had thought the former government more decent than the present one. Apparently he had

been naive enough to think that right would triumph in the end. He'd had eight years to reconsider his idealism, but was still hopeful that the regime supported by men like Colonel Buko would one day be overthrown.

"Your memory is bad," Gorshin said. "The previous regime was not much better than this one."

"Then why are you here?" Rozazi asked.

"Because I spoke too openly against this regime, not because I supported the other."

"Someday we will have a democratic government," Rozazi said.

"Well, in the meantime we'd better get some sleep," said Gorshin.

Each morning a siren shattered the silence at four thirty while it was still dark outside. The hut lights would come on blindingly, and the six men would line up for turns into the tiny connected outhouse. Then they'd dress and be bunched up by the metal door by five o'clock.

The prisoners liked the morning exercise period. Colonel Buko wanted to keep them in good physical condition so that his compound would run efficiently. Each man had his work to do for nine hours of the day. The colonel had scheduled their activities as neatly as Benjamin Franklin:

5:00—6:00 A.M.	Physical exercise
6:00—6:30 A.M.	Showers and shaving in the large, common lavatory building
6:30—7:00 A.M.	Breakfast
7:00—11:30 A.M.	Work
11:30—1:00 P.M.	Lunch and relaxation
1:00—5:30 P.M.	Work
5:30—6:00 P.M.	Supper

The time between six and lights out was the men's own, but most of it was consumed with cleaning up the huts, outhouses, and personal bunk areas. Colonel Buko thought of his compound as a military installation and held military-style inspections every day.

On his second day in the camp, Gorshin was assigned to the laundry. This was considered by the men to be the least desirable of the work assignments. It meant sweating over vats of hot, soapy water heated by wood fires which were constantly kept burning from seven A.M. to late afternoon. Drying was done on long metal clotheslines.

The men in Gorshin's hut had ranked the different types of work in the compound. The best jobs were in maintenance and repair, but these normally went to those with some experience. Second in preference was working in the huge compound garden which supplied most of the inmates' food. In addition to a large, inundated rice area, there were separate sections for Asian cabbage, squash, and tomatoes. Perhaps because excrement was used for fertilizer, the size of the vegetables was exceptional. An orchard provided lemons and oranges. The oranges were full of seeds, but very sweet. There were hog pens and chicken coops connected to the garden, and the same workers took care of the animals. Once or twice a month, beef and fish were brought to the camp from outside. Water was collected in rooftop metal tanks; the rainfall in the area was copious.

The various mess hall jobs were next in preference, followed by garbage disposal, which was done either by burning or burying, depending on the type of garbage. These workers were the only ones who ever left the compound, but always under heavy guard. At the bottom of the list was Gorshin's laundry job. Most of the men there were newcomers like himself.

During his first few days in the camp, Gorshin observed everything carefully. He was looking for some means of effecting his escape. Nothing overhung the fence; in fact, nothing was built very close to it. The electric generators that provided the fence current were always under guard as the colonel had said. Guards seemed to be everywhere, and Gorshin's hut-mates told him that the guards were so afraid of Colonel Buko they were incorruptible.

It didn't look like it was going to be easy.

On his second evening, Gorshin was again invited to play chess with the colonel. This time there was a third man present: a gaunt, bearded, middle-aged officer who was introduced as Captain Sasin, the camp doctor. The doctor drank much rice wine while he observed the game, which Colonel Buko won in nine moves. The two military men chuckled.

"I understand you are a political prisoner," the doctor said to Gorshin. "Tell me, do you think it was worth it?"

"If you feel strongly about something, you have no choice," said Gorshin.

"You have the choice of keeping silent."

"No, you don't."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't understand that," Dr. Sasin said.

Gorshin looked at him curiously. The doctor stroked his wispy beard, not at all discomposed by Gorshin's searching eyes.

"You see, I believe in nothing," Dr. Sasin said.

"Nobody can live without believing in something," Gorshin said.

"Oh yes, they can."

"You must believe in humanity."

"No," said Dr. Sasin. "Nor in inhumanity."

"Then why are you a doctor?"

"Once, I suppose, I was capable of belief."

"And what changed you?"

"I grew older. Now I perform my work as a machine performs its work. I am necessary, as a car mechanic or a garbage collector is necessary. I keep the men here healthy."

"The morning exercise periods were Dr. Sasin's idea," Colonel Buko said. "A very good idea. The men are so healthy that we don't even have a regular infirmary here."

"Their health is as much your doing as mine, colonel. They know that there is no infirmary here."

"Yes, it's important that the prisoners realize certain things," Colonel Buko said. "For example, that the smallest infraction of the rules will be severely punished. I've had several opportunities to show them that like a good parent I am absolutely consistent."

"But men without hope may be capable of anything," Gorshin said.

"In this camp, action is the same as inaction," the colonel said. "There is no hope either way. You saw the sign over the gate."

"Well then, some men would prefer the illusion of hope to inaction," Gorshin said.

"I trust you're not one of them," the colonel said. "If you were to try something foolish, I would have to shoot you. In fact," he chuckled, "I promise you that I would do it myself, with that pistol." He pointed to his holstered Japanese revolver hanging from a hook on the wall.

"I will attempt to abandon all hope," Gorshin said. He started to reset the pieces on the chessboard. The colonel took another sip of rice wine. The doctor lit a cigarette.

"Have you read Jack London's *The Sea Wolf*?" Colonel Buko asked Gorshin.

"No, I don't think so. Is that one of the few books the government still permits?"

"As a professor of literature, you would naturally object to censorship," the colonel remarked understandingly.

"They thoroughly purged the university library," Gorshin said, "if you could still call it a university."

"These things are necessary but unpleasant," Colonel Buko said. "I may be one of the few people left with a decent library."

"Including banned books," said Gorshin.

"Now how could a man in my position have banned books?" the colonel asked, smiling. "In any case, you must read *The Sea Wolf*. I'll lend you my copy."

"I'll be glad to take a look at it."

"Piggishness and yeast," Colonel Buko said. "That's what life is: piggishness and yeast."

He proceeded to take Gorshin's queen in six moves.

Apparently Colonel Buko felt he had learned enough about Gorshin, or else he'd become tired of winning so easily at chess, because the professor was not invited to the colonel's quarters a third time.

Gorshin was quite satisfied with this. He relished the modicum of leisure between supper and lights out. The laundry *was* the worst work assignment in the compound. A row of vats and clothes-wires under a corrugated zinc roof, it baked under the sun and steamed in the drenching rains. To work there meant to be perpetually soaked in sweat, and washing other people's clothes seemed to Gorshin the most disgusting job imaginable. He preferred scrubbing the outhouse attached to the quonset hut.

The men cooperated well in cleaning the hut and usually were able to rest by seven thirty P.M. Perhaps because Gorshin was the most educated in the group, he became the center of the talk during these leisure hours. One night he told them a story from his favorite literature, *The Thousand and One Nights*. It was a work the professor knew virtually by heart, and his stock of stories was as inexhaustible as Scheherazade's. As soon as his hutmates discovered this, they, like the mythical sultan, would ask for one after another. Gorshin was gratified to see that the book he loved had lost none of its magic over the hundreds of years of its existence, even though all copies of it had been burned by the present government. It had been officially pronounced "degenerate." But Gorshin had managed to save his favorite edition as well as several other banned books by hiding them at a cousin's farm before they arrested him.

Dr. Sasin, unlike Colonel Buko, seemed to have retained his interest in Gorshin's ideas. He would drop in frequently to talk to him—to pit his own nihilism against what he termed Gorshin's naiveté. One night he came in during one of the stories from *The Thousand and One Nights* and listened with apparent interest. He stayed for the one which followed. Thereafter he would make a point of being present to hear Scheherazade's fictions.

"You've never read the *Nights*?" Gorshin asked him just before lights out one night.

"No. Oh, a few of them when I was a child: Sinbad and Aladdin's Lamp. I didn't realize there were so many."

"Volumes," said Gorshin. "My favorite edition is in fifteen leatherbound volumes."

"To me that sounds like a lifetime of reading," said the doctor.

"Not so long," Gorshin said.

"I like to hear them because they remind me of when I was a boy," said Dr. Sasin, startling Gorshin with his honesty, his lack of cynicism.

"I suppose we all like them for that reason," Gorshin agreed. "Did you believe in something then?"

"Don't we all?" said the doctor. "Life looks very different to children. It looks like the *Arabian Nights*: magic, heroism, beautiful princesses. . . ."

"Are you married?" Gorshin asked him.

"Never. I'm not the kind of man who marries. And you?"

"I was until a few years ago. My wife died."

"Everything dies," the doctor said.

"Ideas don't," the professor said.

"In time they do."

"*The Arabian Nights* have lasted a thousand years."

"They will die, too." Dr. Sasin said.

Gorshin was beginning to formulate a plan of escape. Because of the rumors he'd heard, he was afraid to confide in his hutmates, wondering if one of them might be Colonel Buko's informer. He didn't think it could be the students or Rozazi, the idealistic major, but the corrupt civil servant and the thief both looked like excellent candidates.

The former civil servant, Balim, was a soft, olive-skinned man with bad teeth and equally bad breath. He wasn't a bad hutmate, however, since he was mainly concerned with getting along comfortably without any trouble for himself. His favorite line was "I

don't want any trouble." But Gorshin wouldn't trust him a jot: Balim was the kind of man who'd sell his soul for some small creature comfort.

Kochi, the thief, was a weasel in every respect. He spoke in a whiny, wheedling way that got on Gorshin's nerves. Although they hadn't yet missed anything in the hut, Gorshin was pretty sure that one day they would.

As it happened, when Kochi finally did give in to his incorrigible propensities, no one in the hut was the victim. Instead he stole a basket of fresh tomatoes from the mess hall where he worked. He was caught, and Gorshin was given the opportunity to see Colonel Buko's manner of meting out justice. Both of Kochi's ears were cut off. After that he cried a great deal and kept to himself in his corner bunk, his face to the wall. Gorshin couldn't stand to look at him.

Three days after Kochi lost his ears, another prisoner in Hut 7 assaulted a guard who, he claimed, was constantly harassing him. Colonel Buko naturally saw this as a serious breach of camp discipline. By way of punishment, he had all of the prisoner's teeth pulled out. It took a long time, and the man's screams filled the compound and had a very chastening effect on the other inmates. It would be months before another breach of discipline.

Punishments like these convinced Gorshin that, in spite of his fondness for reading, the colonel was indeed the monster he claimed to be. Dr. Sasin was called in to stop the bleeding and prevent infection after both punishments; he performed these duties impassively and made not one comment on the colonel's perversity.

"You seem very loyal to the colonel," Gorshin remarked to him bitterly on the night of the toothpulling incident.

"I do my job as I'm told," Dr. Sasin said. "I have no loyalties."

"Not to your parents? Your profession?"

"Loyalty implies a system of values. But in this country there is no longer a system of values. Colonel Buko is quite correct: might makes right."

"Yet you are one of the few men here I somehow feel I could trust," Gorshin said.

"Don't believe it," Dr. Sasin said soberly. "I am not a man to be trusted."

Gorshin had all but worked out his scheme of escape. It awaited only the right conjunction of circumstances. Just the hope of escaping Colonel Buko's well-run hell lifted his spirits immensely. He was almost in a genial mood when

the colonel sent for him again one evening.

"I thought you had tired of humiliating me at chess," he said.

"I have," said the colonel. "I called you in to lend you the book we spoke of, London's *The Sea Wolf*."

"Oh."

The colonel slid the novel to him across his desk. "You may learn something from that. Maybe it will make you a better chess player."

"Thank you," Gorshin said. He tucked the book under his arm and returned to his quonset hut, where his fellow inmates were awaiting another installment of *The Arabian Nights*. A few minutes after his return, Dr. Sasin dropped by as had become his custom.

In the evenings following, Gorshin would read some pages from *The Sea Wolf* before he began his storytelling. The novel's hero was a titanic brute named Wolfe Larsen who, having come from hard beginnings, was convinced that life was a dog-eat-dog battle for survival whose ultimate meaning was absolutely nothing. To be strong was good, because the strong survived. Life was a fermenting yeast, a senseless hierarchy of voracious cannibalism. Gorshin could easily see why Colonel Buko liked the book, and even he had to feel a grudging admiration for the colossal rebel London had created. But it was a relief to turn afterwards to the gentler cynicism of Scheherazade's tales.

One evening, after he'd been in the camp almost six weeks, Gorshin decided the time had come. The key to his escape plan was the electric station, the generators that fed the floodlights and the electrified fence. A padlocked door and the ever-present pair of guards seemed to make the station invulnerable, but this evening the door was not padlocked because a maintenance man was working inside. What was needed was something to distract the guards, and Gorshin had already thought that out.

Because of his floodlights, Colonel Buko had placed no restrictions on the men's walking around the compound between supper and lights out. Gorshin had taken one confederate into his plan and this confederate had supplied him with a heavy monkey wrench, a can of lighter fluid, and a box of matches. With the monkey wrench stuck in his belt under his shirt and the matches and fluid in his pockets, Gorshin strolled casually across the open space between his hut and the laundry building where he worked. The laundry was never locked. Gorshin slipped inside and threw heaps of dried clothing against the wooden walls. He doused the piles liberally with lighter fluid and tossed several burning

matches on each. In a few seconds the clothing was blazing, the greedy flames already licking the walls. Gorshin slipped out the door and strolled towards the electric station, which stood close by.

No one appeared to have taken any notice of his actions. It wasn't long before the cry of "Fire!" went up, and every eye in the area was on the flames leaping from the windows of the laundry. As Gorshin had expected, one of the guards at the electric station started running immediately towards the conflagration. The other hesitated, unsure whether he should leave his post even under these circumstances. Pointing excitedly and yelling like the others, Gorshin approached the second guard, a young corporal. The guard still hesitated. Gorshin reached inside his shirt, jerked out his monkey wrench, and struck the young guard solidly across the base of the skull. He fell as if hit by a bulldozer.

Everyone was shouting and running towards the blazing building and no one had noticed Gorshin's act. He heaved back the already half-open door of the station and pulled the guard's body through very quickly, kicking the door to behind him. The maintenance man, who was not Gorshin's confederate but one of Colonel Buko's most trusted inmates, turned to Gorshin with eyes dilated by surprise and fear. Gorshin took no chances and hit him also with the heavy wrench. His first blow only grazed the terror-stricken man, but his second sent the man to the dirt floor unconscious.

The professor had learned about generators while living for some months at his cousin's farm. All the electricity there had been produced by generator. In seconds Gorshin put the two machines out of commission, plunging the whole compound into sudden darkness, the only light coming from the fire. Before anyone could fully realize what had happened, Gorshin was out the door and around the side of the electric station. He ran through the darkness along a route he had chosen very carefully, a route where buildings shielded his every step from the light created by the fire.

Gorshin's plan brought him to the bottom of the wooden lattice-work guard tower that rose beside the fence not far from his own quonset hut. The tower's structure made it a natural ladder, and Gorshin climbed up the inside quickly, out of sight of everyone including the two guards in the little shack above him. The tower was higher than the barbed wire-topped fence, and Gorshin was able to step onto the wire while still unnoticed by the guards above him. The wire gave beneath his thick-soled shoes, but Gorshin's

clothes caught in it as he let himself down the outside of the fence. He tore his clothing from the barbs savagely, cutting himself in several places, and was soon scrambling down. In all the commotion, the guards above did not notice him at all.

He dropped the last six feet to the ground, landed on his feet, and started to run for the nearest wall of jungle. It was a clouded, moonless night, and traveling very close to the ground, Gorshin was nothing more than a swiftly gliding shadow. Just as he was about to enter the deeper darkness of the jungle, half a dozen lights blazed out at him from the trees. Gorshin was blinded by the lights and instinctively threw his hands up over his eyes. The lights rapidly closed the few yards' distance to him, and Gorshin found himself in the hands of Colonel Buko's soldiers. The colonel stood with his hands on his hips grinning at the professor's amazed face. Beside the colonel stood Dr. Sasin. Dr. Sasin had been Gorshin's confederate.

"I warned you that you shouldn't trust me," the doctor said.

His clothes in rags, his arms and legs bleeding, Gorshin stood in front of the colonel's desk. The colonel sat with his polished boots up on the desk, smoking a cigarette. Against a wall, in a comfortable chair, sat the doctor.

"Now that was quite exciting," the colonel smiled. "Did you really think you could convert Dr. Sasin?"

"I'm glad that you enjoyed it," Gorshin said bitterly.

"Why, I even helped you along with it!" Colonel Buko said. "Didn't you notice how incredibly smoothly everything went for you? As if Divine Providence were at your elbow."

"You could have eliminated all this charade," Gorshin said.

"I could have, yes. But I wanted you to taste the illusion of success, of freedom attained—so that your final disappointment would be all the more crushing."

"In the process, you lost your laundry building," Gorshin said.

"Oh, that's nothing. Rebuilding it will give the prisoners something to do. You know I like to keep them busy."

"Well, shoot me and get it over with," said the professor.

"No, no, not tonight. I want you to think about it first. I'll do it tomorrow at noon. You remember what the experience of awaiting his own execution did to Dostoevski? Of course, he wasn't executed—a little joke of the czar—but Dostoevski never got over it."

"Will you play the same perverse joke?" Gorshin asked him.

"Oh no, I *will* shoot you. Go back to your hut now and get some sleep."

Gorshin walked out the door and across the again-floodlit space that separated the colonel's quarters from quonset hut 4. Colonel Buko didn't even bother to send a guard with him.

At noon the next day Gorshin was standing ten yards from Colonel Buko's pointed pistol. He was not tied or blindfolded. He was drenched under a tropical downpour that had been falling in thick grey curtains for more than an hour. The colonel did not say anything, and Gorshin did not say anything either. The colonel sighted the pistol carefully and placed two bullets exactly where Gorshin's heart would be. Gorshin fell without a sound and lay in the mud in the rain.

Every two weeks a supply truck arrived at the compound from the capital two hundred and twenty miles away. The truck which arrived about a month after Gorshin's death contained a package addressed to Dr. Sasin. He took it to his quarters before unwrapping it.

It was Dr. Sasin who had pronounced Gorshin dead after the execution and who had supervised the burial of the body. He had also put the blanks in Colonel Buko's pistol and shown Gorshin how to release "blood" into his shirt. In the package which the doctor opened in private were fifteen beautifully bound volumes of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

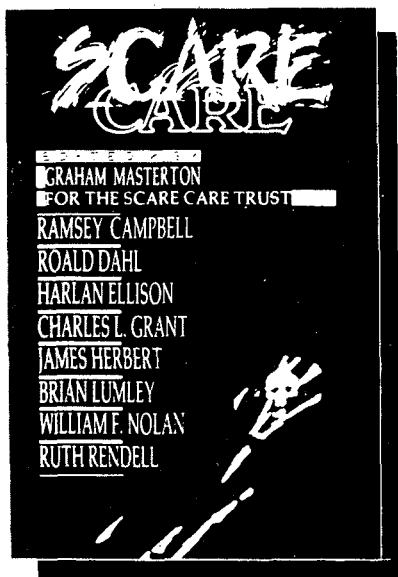
Weeks later, in another country, when Gorshin was asked why he hadn't simply escaped according to his original plan, he replied:

"First of all, I wasn't sure it would work; and secondly, it was preferable to be thought dead than to have escaped. They wouldn't look for a dead man."

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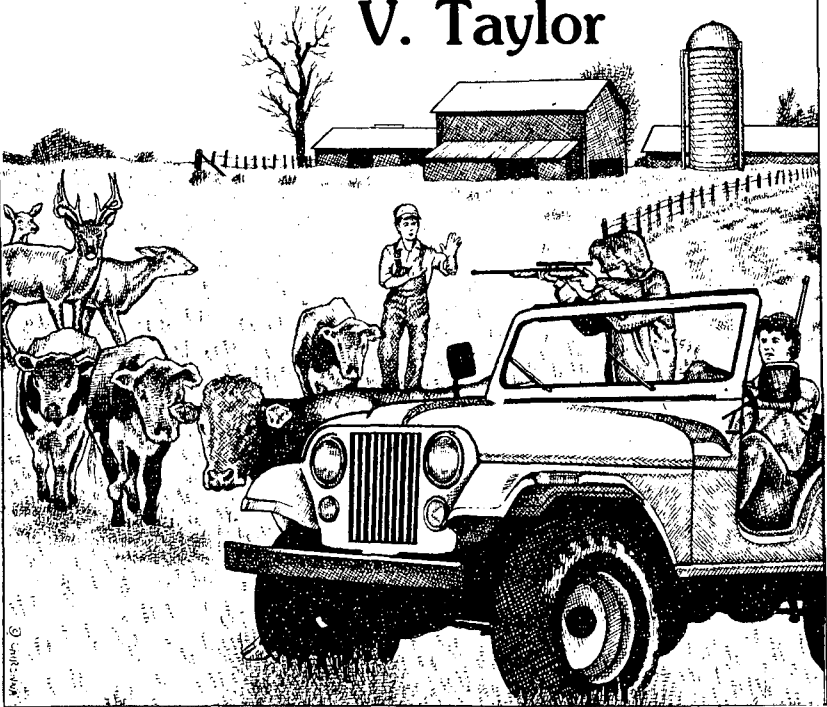


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FICTION

The Deer

by Archie
V. Taylor



Charles stood at the kitchen window with a cup of coffee in his hand. Checking on his animals had become a morning ritual with him. The cattle were in the back field where the corn had been gathered, grazing among the crushed stalks, searching for lingering blades of green grass. There was no sign that anything unusual had happened during the night. As he turned to go back to the table where he could sit down while he finished his coffee, he saw the deer.

There were three of them—two does and a magnificent buck—ambling down the lane in the direction of the barn, snipping dried grass and munching it as they moved along. Seeing deer this close to the house was unusual and Charles wanted to step outside for a better look at them, but he realized that any noise or sudden movement would scare them away, so he continued to watch through the glass.

When they reached the barn, the does went on out of sight, but the buck stopped and looked toward the house as if it knew someone was watching. It was a beautiful animal with unusual color, dark brown, almost black, with magnificent antlers gleaming in the sunlight. As it stood absolutely still with its head up and eyes alert, Charles felt something inexplicable stirring inside his chest and the deer made him feel awed by its presence. He was later to learn that its color was not the only unusual thing about it.

Carefully moving the curtain aside, he stepped closer to the glass. When he did, the buck looked directly at him. For an instant, like creatures from different galaxies, they gazed at each other as if across a vast fence of time and space. Then, all at once, a warm feeling rushed through Charles. He raised his hand in salute; the buck tossed its head and went on behind the barn, leaving Charles with a pang of sorrow, the way a man feels when he meets a stranger and doesn't know how to become his friend.

Not once did he think it strange for the buck to act the way it did. Animals behaved in curious ways. More than once he had seen an old cow push a yearling into the electric fence to see if it was charged. More than once he had seen a cow use her horns to break the hot line.

After the deer went out of sight behind the barn, he rubbed the bald spot on his head. All he could think about was how to get closer so he could talk to the deer as he did to his cattle. Hurrying to the sink, he dumped the cold coffee from the cup and refilled it from the pot. Then he rushed back to the window. When the three deer came from behind the barn and went back the way they had come, he felt a keen sense of disappointment because he couldn't think of any way to get closer without frightening them.

Since the death of his wife ten years ago, Charles had lived alone in the big farmhouse. For a time, he considered finding another woman, but he finally decided that one good woman in a lifetime was enough, so he transferred his love to the animals he raised.

Putting on his coat and hat, he stepped outside, intending to shovel feed for the cattle. It was a crisp autumn morning with the smell of winter in the air. When he heard a car coming down the lane from the highway, being in no particular hurry since the cattle were still in the back field, he paused on the stoop and waited until a jeep came around the corner of the house and stopped in front of him.

Brock Winters and Carl Suggs got out. Each man carried a high-powered rifle. Brock was tall and muscular. He had once combined corn for Charles when his equipment broke down, and Charles liked the man. He knew Suggs—who was short, with the dark stubble of a day-old beard covering his face and the evidence of his love for beer hanging over his belt—only by sight. A rumor had gone the rounds that the two men put out grain each year in a back field on Suggs' farm. This year someone got to the deer ahead of them.

The appearance of the two men with guns put a pall over the appearance of the deer, as if winged shadows of circling vultures had fallen on them, and Charles didn't want them hunting the deer on his place, no matter if Brock had helped him in the past.

Cradling his rifle under his arm, Brock leaned against the front of the jeep and grinned at Charles. "Someone told me they saw deer on your place this morning," he said.

"You don't say!"

"A big buck and two does."

"Is that so?"

Holding his rifle with both hands, Suggs stepped off to one side and began scanning the fields.

"There don't seem to be many around this year," Brock said.

"I heard that one hunter got his early," Charles said.

Brock grinned. "I heard that, too," he said.

"I don't reckon you'd mind a man doing a little hunting?" Suggs asked.

"I reckon I would," Charles answered.

"Why's that?"

"I've seen more than one cow that died in place of a rabbit."

"Hell, we'll be careful."

"Are you willing to pay for one of my cows if you shoot it? Are you willing to help me round them up if you cause them to stampede? Are you willing to help me fix the fence if they tear it down?"

"Nothing like that is going to happen," Brock said.

"How can you be sure?"

"Hell, man! All we want to do is hunt a little," Suggs said.

"I don't allow anyone to hunt on my place. When hunters stampeded my cattle two years ago, it took three days to round them up, and I damned near walked my legs off finding them."

"We could go on and hunt anyway," Suggs said.

"I'm sure you could," Charles said quietly. He looked the other man straight in the eyes. "However, there are dogs running loose around here. Sometimes they gang up and attack my cattle. They killed a calf not long back, and I don't like them very much. Whenever I see one, I shoot at it with full intent to kill. If I see something moving through my fields and don't know you're there, I might take a shot. I'd hate like hell to put a hole in you, thinking you're a dog."

"Anyone can tell the difference between a man and a dog."

"Weren't you the dude who told me about the hunter that shot a farmer's cow, mistaking it for a rabbit, Brock?" Charles asked while keeping his eyes on Suggs. "If a hunter can mistake a cow for a rabbit, I'm sure I can mistake a man for a dog, since my eyesight isn't what it used to be."

Carl Suggs turned angrily away. Both men got back in the jeep. Brock drove away.

Charles waited until he heard the jeep turn onto the highway before he started for the barn. When he came to the pickup, he opened the door and honked the horn to call the cattle. After he reached the barn, he shoveled feed into the trough and filled the manger with hay. Then the cattle came in to eat, and he checked them over and counted them as he always did. Not only was he concerned with dogs killing the calf and biting a cow's tail half off during the summer but sometimes an animal got sick and he had to go to the pasture and find it.

On the way to the house, he spotted the deer in the back field where the cattle had been grazing. They ambled along at the edge of the woods, grazing on clumps of grass. Charles stopped and for a moment considered walking to the woods for a closer look at them, but he quickly discarded the idea and went on into the house.

After he took off his coat and hat and put them on the table, he filled his cup with coffee, picked up a farm journal from the end of the table, and went into the living room where he could relax

while he caught up on the latest news. He had just set his coffee cup on the table beside the chair and gotten himself comfortable when he heard the jeep roaring down the lane again.

When he rushed to the window and saw how fast the jeep was coming, he turned grimly away and walked swiftly into the bedroom and got the shotgun from behind the door where he kept it. He didn't want to shoot anyone. He hoped he wouldn't have to. But he knew that if he didn't stop them now, others would come with guns, and the first thing he knew they'd be killing all his animals.

As he stepped out the kitchen door, Brock and Suggs were getting out of the jeep. Each had a rifle. They didn't look at Charles but ducked their heads and started trotting toward the back field where he had last seen the deer. There wasn't time to say anything. The men were almost out of shotgun range. He pumped a shell into the chamber, aimed to the left of Suggs, and pulled the trigger. When the shotgun boomed, dirt flew up not far from Suggs. Both men stopped as if they had come up against a stone wall.

Suggs jerked his rifle up as if he were going to shoot back. Brock caught the barrel while it was pointed up and said something to Suggs. After Suggs lowered the rifle, they turned to face Charles.

"What the hell," Suggs said when he saw the shotgun still at Charles's shoulder.

"Didn't you see that goddamn dog?" Charles asked.

"What dog?" Suggs asked.

"The one I was shooting at," Charles said.

"Hell, no! I didn't see no dog because there wasn't any."

"I could have sworn I saw one of them goddamn German shepherds that's been bothering my cattle," Charles said. "They're vicious bastards. I've been trying to get one for a long time."

"I told you he was crazy," Brock said, keeping his voice low so that Charles couldn't tell if he wanted him to hear or not.

"I didn't see no dog," Suggs said.

"Neither did I," Brock said.

"I guess I'm the only one who saw it," Charles said, putting surprise in his voice. He kept the shotgun to his shoulder and moved his eyes as if he were still looking for the dog.

After a moment, the two men went back to the jeep, got in, and drove away.

It was getting on toward noon when the sheriff's car turned off the highway and drove up the lane. Charles got up, put his coat

and hat on, and went out to the back stoop. After Roy Stauffer got out of the car, he pulled his pants up over his gut and came to the bottom step. "Nice day, ain't it?" he said.

"It sure is," Charles said. He had known the fat man since long before he got himself elected sheriff. "I hope it lasts a long time. I don't mind waiting on bad weather."

Roy laughed and looked at Charles as if he expected to be invited into the house. When the invitation didn't come, he turned his head and began scanning the fields with his eyes.

"I see you got your crop in," he said.

"Yeah," Charles said. "It was dry this fall, and I got into the fields early."

"Them sure is nice cattle."

"I feed them good."

"I guess you do at that," Roy said.

When the sheriff kept his eyes trained on the woods for a long time, it confirmed Charles's suspicion that he had come about the deer.

"I heard there were some deer seen on your place this morning," Roy said, getting to the point of his visit at last.

"Is that so?" Charles asked.

"Someone said three."

"Are you hunting deer, sheriff?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I heard about a place that was salted. Maybe you'd like to go there and try your luck."

"I think someone's already been there," the sheriff said with a barking laugh. Then he turned his pale, watery eyes on Charles. "I heard that you took a shot at someone this morning," he said.

"Sheriff, if I had really taken a shot at Carl Suggs, you'd be hauling him out of here in a dead wagon."

"That ain't what I heard."

"What did you hear?"

"I heard you took a shot at Carl Suggs for no reason."

"Don't give me that!" Charles said angrily. "If you're going to make accusations without backing them up, I'm not going to stand here and listen."

"All right! All right! Don't get yourself all het up," the sheriff said. "Brock Winters and Carl Suggs came into my office and told me you took a shot at them."

"Well, sheriff, this morning Winters and Suggs came in here,

claiming they had seen deer and asked me if they could hunt. You know the trouble I've had with hunters. I told them no. I have cattle and don't want anyone shooting them for rabbits or stampeding them or shooting them just for the fun of it. They went away, but they came back and tried to hunt anyway. To make a point, I unloaded a shot from my shotgun, but I didn't shoot at them."

"They claimed you did."

"They're both still living, aren't they? I'm a pretty damn good shot with a shotgun. I've had enough practice with all these miserable dogs that run loose around here that your people won't take care of."

The sheriff fixed Charles with his watery eyes. "Let me tell you something, mister," he said. "If anything happens to those men, I'll know who to look for."

"Let me tell you something too, sheriff," Charles said angrily. "If those men come back on my farm with their guns and start killing my animals in the name of hunting, I might mistake them for one of those miserable dogs. You tell them to keep their guns off my land."

"If you shoot them, you could wind up in prison," the sheriff said.

"I know that, sheriff, but one thing is for certain, they'll be scurrying for a doctor to have buckshot taken from where they sit."

After lunch Charles carried a block of salt to the pasture and put it in the rack he had constructed to keep the cattle from trampling it into the ground. Then looked at the big rock he intended to pull out with the tractor and move to the edge of the field. The rock sloped to a point about waist high. He didn't know if his tractor could pull it all in one piece. As he tried to decide the best way to proceed, a big, white-faced bull came up and nuzzled him two or three times, wanting to be petted.

"How're you doing, Bronson," Charles said and stroked the bull's massive head. He always called his animals by names he had given them. Some, like the bull, insisted on having their heads rubbed.

By the time he was ready to start back to the house, the cattle had gathered around the salt. In back of the herd, as if they too awaited their turn to lick the salt, stood the three deer. The buck looked at Charles across the fifty yards that separated them. There was defiance in the way it stood so close, showing not the slightest sign of fear. When the does noticed Charles, they pranced about the buck, ready for instant flight. Then the buck began to walk

slowly toward the salt, and they nervously followed.

Charles had gotten almost back to the house when he saw the jeep turn into the lane again. From the way it was coming, he knew there would not be time to go inside and get his shotgun. Thinking to frighten the deer away before the two men reached them with guns, he ran toward them, yelling and waving his arms, but the buck merely raised its head to watch the jeep.

When he thought about it after it was all over, everything seemed very strange to Charles. He could see Suggs standing up in the jeep with his rifle across the top of the windshield. He realized how futile it was to go on with his antics, yet he continued to run toward the animals, yelling and waving his arms as the jeep turned from the lane into the field.

Only the cattle now stood between the hunters and the deer. All the men had to do was stop, take aim, and pull the trigger. Then a magnificent animal would be dead. When the jeep came closer, the cattle moved away from the salt. Instead of scattering in a wild stampede, they stared at the intruder but moved to one side, opening a hole through their ranks that suddenly framed the deer. While the men in the jeep whooped, the does moved nervously away from the cattle, putting the buck between them and the oncoming vehicle. Still the buck didn't run but continued to watch the hunters fiercely, with the mercilessness of ancient hate.

Charles wondered why Brock didn't stop the jeep and let Suggs shoot and get it over with. They were well within rifle range. Yet the whole scene had suddenly become unreal. With Suggs still on his feet, his rifle across the windshield, the jeep charged the cattle. Still they didn't take to flight. Charles had been around them with the pickup, but this was something entirely different. The animals just stood there watching the jeep as if they were curious about it and didn't expect it to harm them.

Then the big bull, Bronson, moved directly into the path of the jeep. When the vehicle swerved, two cows on the right moved out of the way, and there was the rock that Charles had inspected earlier.

Brock wrenched the wheel and tried to miss it, but the jeep skidded on the turf, and the front wheel struck the rock. Up the incline raced the jeep. When it reached the point, it twisted through the air and landed on its side. Then it rolled completely over and landed on its wheel again. Miraculously, neither man got hurt.

When the jeep started to roll, Suggs threw his rifle. Before it

stopped moving, he leaped out and ran to retrieve it. Putting it to his shoulder, he took careful aim, but before he could squeeze the trigger, the big, white-faced bull, Bronson, charged and butted him in the rump. As Suggs went staggering forward, trying to retain his balance, the gun went flying from his hands. In all his years around animals, Charles had never seen anything quite like this. His eyes went from the bull to Suggs to the buck and back again. In some strange way all three seemed to be connected. Then it occurred to him that Brock might try to shoot the deer himself, but when he glanced that way, Brock had his arms around the steering wheel and his head pressed to the rim as if he couldn't let go.

After Suggs regained his balance, he scampered across the field and tried to reach the rifle. The moment his fingers settled around the stock, the bull stepped on his hand. He howled with pain and tried to get free, but the bull just looked at him as if it were curious about this noisy creature. When it did lift its hoof, Suggs jerked his hand away and put it between his legs and started rocking back and forth on the ground.

Tears came to his eyes. He rocked back and forth screaming his rage until the tears stopped flowing. Then he reached for the rifle with his uninjured hand, but again he was too late. At that moment, the bull decided to lie down and picked the place where the gun lay. After Suggs realized he couldn't get to the gun, he started cursing and beating the ground with his uninjured hand.

As if the hunter no longer concerned it, the buck started moving to the salt again with the does trotting along behind it, and Charles came suddenly out of his trance and started across the field at a run. He didn't feel much sympathy for Suggs—the man had asked for what he got—but he wanted to get him back in the jeep so Brock could take him to the doctor or at least take him away before either man decided to shoot the deer with Brock's gun. To get to Suggs he had to pass close to the buck. It was a chance of a lifetime. He couldn't pass it up no matter how much the injured man was suffering. He decided to stop and speak to the animal if it didn't run away. When the buck looked at him, he saw something mysterious, even friendly, in its eyes.

"How are you, friend?" Charles said softly, fearing the sound of his voice would frighten the animal away. Smiling broadly, he held out his hand. The buck came closer but stopped several yards away. They eyed each other, and as if something outside himself had

entered his heart, a feeling of great joy came over him. His smile broadened.

"My friend, I'm so very glad we meet at last," Charles said.

The buck turned away and moved across the field to the injured man who had stopped beating the ground with his hand and now lay with his eyes closed, cursing softly. When it stopped and sniffed at his face, Suggs opened his eyes. Then he screamed in terror.

"Get him away from me!" he screamed, digging his heel into the ground, trying to back away.

"He won't hurt you," Charles said.

There was a glow of madness in his eyes as if scattered dreams of hell left him reeling. "You just don't know," Suggs said. "You just don't know."

After Charles helped Suggs into the jeep and strapped him in with the seat belt, Brock drove away. Charles never saw either man again. He later heard rumors that Brock quit farming and moved west and Suggs committed himself to a psychiatric ward because of a recurring vision that plagued him, but he never learned if either rumor was true.

As for the deer, while he was helping the injured man, they wandered away. He last saw them as they entered the woods, the magnificent buck leading the way with the does following closely behind.

But on long winter nights, when his mind went back to that day, he knew that something extraordinary had happened, which explained to his satisfaction why the hunters acted so crazy, especially Suggs. While he stood face to face with it, the buck spoke to him or it seemed to him that it did, not in the ordinary sense like a man naturally, but by projecting images into his mind as clear as those he saw on TV, images of friendship and tranquility. Although he wasn't all that sure it had actually happened, he often wondered what kind of vision of hell the buck projected into the hunters' minds that day.

Eleven

by Janet Stockey

Bridget, a born optimist, smashed her fist through the window.

She used her left hand because she wanted to spare her right. Fortunately, she wore mittens.

Bridget reached through the broken window, turned the knob, and let herself out of the garage. She ran to the back door of the house and went into the landing. She took off her left mitten and looked at her

hand. Only one cut, but a bad one. Right on the knuckle of her index finger.

Bridget found her parents in the living room watching Walter Cronkite. Mr. Cronkite was talking about President-elect Nixon. Bridget listened. At the commercial break, she blurted out her story.

"I got stuck in the garage. I was reading an old newspaper. 'Why Onassis won't wed,' it said. Isn't that funny? And I got stuck. The doorknob fell off. On the inside. The rollup door was locked. I couldn't open it. And I was knocking and knocking and knocking on the window, and I was pounding, and it broke, and I cut myself, and I opened the door and got out, but the window's broken, and I cut myself, like I said."

"Jesus Keerist!" said her father. He got up to look at the cut. "Why didn't you use a hammer or somethin'?"

"It was an accident," said Bridget. Then she realized that nobody could blame her for breaking the window. And that she would have been missed and found in a few hours had she only sat and waited. Too late—she had cut herself. But not too badly.

"Better put a Band-aid on it," said Bridget's father. "Wash it first."

Bridget's mother said, "All right, now!" and waved impa-

tiently. "The nooze is back on!"

Bridget took a bath; or rather, she sat in the bathtub for a long time. She stared at the strawberry-white cut on her knuckle. She didn't know she was sobbing till her father stomped into the bathroom.

"Hurry up! You've been in here a solid hour!" He looked at Bridget's weepy face, then grabbed the back of her neck. He pushed her face into the water. Bridget had nearly drowned once, so she was scared. She squawked.

"Git movin'!" said her father, and left without looking behind him.

Bridget felt like a wet bird. She took a deep breath and slipped under water. She tossed her hair around, then came up gasping.

Bridget dried herself, then put Bactine on her cut and bandaged it. She wondered if some parents might have taken their daughters in to get stitches. She decided she didn't need stitches anyway. She put on her nightgown, thinking of Walter Cronkite and what he had said about President-elect Nixon. She went into the living room.

Her mother was there alone this time, her feet on the couch. She was doing a crossword puzzle and smoking. Bridget stood aside from the smoke.

"How's yer hand?" asked her

mother, not looking up.

"Okay," said Bridget. "Is Nixon a lawyer?"

"I gass so. They youzally are."

"Walter Cronkite said something about him being a lawyer."

"Well, then he is."

"Then I can be president after I become a lawyer."

"Wayll, when you go to college maybe you'll meet a boy who wants to be president, and then . . ."

Bridget was patient, but this time she couldn't help it. She shrieked. She even pictured herself as an orange-red flashing light on top of a police car.

"Shut up or I'll skull ya!" said Bridget's mother half rising.

That's how Bridget's parents talked to her. "I'll skull ya." "I'll skin ya." "I'll tan yer hide." "Y'll be black 'n' blue." Their abuse was verbal; their threats didn't come off. Bridget knew they wouldn't.

For an eleven-year-old optimist, Bridget had a lot of trouble sleeping. She was bothered in the winter by the rattling windows and in the summer by the crickets. The green Midwestern suburbs were full of crickets, mosquitoes, flies, fireflies, and tiny mammals. Bridget remembered the snakes, too, from her babyhood. Everything around her took her attention, and sleep came hard.

That November night she kept

rolling around in her creaky bed and turning over her pillow. She was thinking of long division, the presidency, her cut hand, and a famous local criminal. Then, in the dark, she jumped.

Her father's voice, angry and sharp, came from her parents' bedroom. Bridget thought he was yelling at her for being awake; this sometimes happened. Then she knew that her father was yelling at her mother.

"I ain't gonna wear one," he said, "and I'll hang you with it, and you can have your picture in the paper tomorra."

Not a word came from Bridget's mother. Soon her parents' bed began to creak. Bridget was afraid for her mother.

"If you hurt my mamma," she whispered, "I'll kill you."

Bridget's father must have been kidding. In ten minutes everyone in the house was asleep.

Bridget was a good student; she disliked school only because she was a little afraid. She was slim and pretty, but the other girls shunned her. Bridget was awkward, yet she always managed to wax eloquent in the wrong way and on the wrong subjects.

Everyone knew that she wanted her first menstrual period, and everyone thought she

was crazy for it. And she always turned in her short stories ten minutes after Mrs. Sanger had passed out the yellow sheets. Worst of all, she was very unathletic, and this did not endear her to her teammates in gym class. As such scared, unpopular children go, Bridget was cheerful.

At school, the boys generally took no notice of any of the girls. The boys were called only by nicknames based loosely on their last names. Examples were "Rowboat" for David Rose and "Cannibal" for David Savage. But the boys called the girls "Jansen" and "Smith." Whenever they had to sit near girls, the boys made a dumb-show of vomiting.

Bridget was glad not to be a boy. She felt that she would have made a poor one. And she saw what happened to unpopular boys; it was unspeakable.

Bridget found childhood a trial, but she had plans for the future. She would have to get a scholarship. She wanted to be a defense attorney like Perry Mason, rescuing innocent people from bungling prosecutors and solving murder cases single-handed in open court. Everyone would admire her.

More immediately, Bridget thought she should catch the Rivermound Rapist.

"Rivermound Rapist" was a misnomer: the Rivermound

rapist not only raped his victims; he cut off their heads, too. Bridget knew that rape was a serious crime. Her mother had told her that a rapist tore off his victim's clothes and looked at her naked body. Some states even had the death penalty for rape.

As for decapitation, that was even worse. "As Tweedledee said," Bridget told her gym teammates, "'It's one of the most serious things that can possibly happen to one . . . to get one's head cut off.'" She also told them, "As Hercule Poirot said, 'Me, I can suspect everybody!'"

Bridget routinely suspected every man she saw of being the Rivermound Rapist. Her father was too much of a prig, she decided. And Mr. Varney, the music teacher, was too young. The rapist had raped and killed exactly one girl each November for the past ten years—a staggering length of time, Bridget thought. She figured that the Rivermound Rapist had to be all of *thirty*, and might be even older.

Bridget had studied the Rivermound Rapist's methods. He attacked only girls aged eleven. He had always attacked confident, outgoing girls. Bridget thought he preferred them. She didn't know that such girls simply were the easiest for some men to lure.

The rapist's other characteristics, described every year in the newspapers and on television, were as follows. He chose a girl from Rivermound County. He had started with the edges of the county and had spiraled in toward its center. He chose girls from public schools, and never hit any school twice. (Bridget's school had not been hit, and was at the center of the county.) The victim disappeared from near the school, or while at play, or while walking to a friend's house. She was found after precisely eleven days. Her body always had been preserved by freezing.

The Rivermound Rapist's blood type was AB negative. He was a white man with brown hair. For the fourth crime, he had worn dark blue cotton; for the seventh, white cotton. That was the evidence from semen, fibers, stray hairs, and so on. Except for the rare blood type, it was too little to go on. The police got nowhere interviewing and reinterviewing child molesters. Some ex-offenders had cleared themselves by giving blood samples, on legal advice.

Everyone, from Walter Cronkite to Mrs. Sanger, remarked on the rapist's methodical ways. He could not be crazy.

Now, in November, most mothers of girls in Bridget's

class walked their daughters to and from school every day, as if it were their first day of kindergarten. Bridget wanted to tag along with someone, but she was afraid of being snubbed. It was a good thing, she thought, that no one would ever want to look at her naked body. (Once, Bridget had cried and clung to her father's leg; she was afraid to go into the woods, she had said; a bear might eat her. Her father had replied, "If any bear saw your ugly mug, he'd run the other way.")

November wore on. Bridget called up the dentist, made an appointment for a cleaning, and kept it, even though the dentist had brown hair.

By the day before Thanksgiving, the rapist had not yet struck. Perhaps he was dead.

At noon on the day before Thanksgiving, Bridget leaned up against the school building in the shade, near the teachers' cars. She thought no one could pester her there. She wanted to finish *The ABC Murders*. Mrs. Christie's solutions always astounded her, yet they seemed inevitable.

The wind blew cold. Bridget's lips chapped as she held open her mouth, reading. Then she heard a voice.

"Hey! Moore!"

It was Paul Drummond, known as "Drumstick."

"Moore!"

Bridget ignored him and kept her eyes on the book, although she no longer could read.

Drumstick came up to her and mocked her pose against the building. He had blond hair and lots of freckles, and he smelled like sweat twelve months a year. He was not well-liked, but he was obnoxious and unoriginal, so Bridget thought he had the confidence she lacked.

"Whatcha readin' now, Moore?" asked Drumstick. "Ay Bee Cee. What're you—in kindergarten?"

"You're out of your depth," said Bridget, her eyes still on the book.

"Oooh—big words," said Drumstick. "What're you—a college peffesser?"

"What big words? I didn't use any big words yet, that I know of," said Bridget. "And you're contradicting yourself."

Drumstick looked at her blankly. "Oooh, none of the girls like ya," he said. He spat on the gravel through a gap in his teeth and walked away.

The lunch recess was over, and Bridget had started to feel scared. That afternoon, the class was to do an experiment calling for "grievous bodily injury," as she called it. Someone was going to stab Bridget's finger with a lancet, and draw blood. And

that someone was the person she liked least in the whole class: her enemy, Kelly Franklin.

Bridget liked Mrs. Sanger, partly because she assigned partners to the children for experiments and field trips. Had the students chosen their own partners, Bridget would have been left without one. (That's what happened in gym.) Bridget had an idea that Mrs. Sanger chose the pairs with an object in mind: equality. She often paired boys with girls, or the popular with the unpopular. Bridget had often wound up with Kelly Franklin.

Kelly was popular, in the child's sense of the word. (If popularity means having a lot of people actually like you, then Kelly was not popular.) She was not a tomboy, but she was athletic. She expressed herself loudly, openly, and often. She had breasts. Her hobby was making Bridget uncomfortable.

"You can't be a lawyer, you're too stupid. Hey, Bridget, you're a disgrace to the human race."

Sometimes Kelly actually pushed Bridget. Bridget was glad Kelly wasn't inclined to beat her up. She was, as we've heard, glad to be a girl.

Bridget never thought of telling her troubles to her parents or to Mrs. Sanger. She felt that she deserved no better treat-

ment—and that Kelly Franklin was less than a worm under her feet.

Bridget didn't know why Kelly was so conceited. She thought Kelly looked like a monkey. Her eyebrows were bushy, and she had the odd upper lip of the lower primates, and a faint mustache. Furthermore, her parents had been bitterly divorced, with scandal on both sides, since Kelly had been a baby. In Bridget's eyes, this last fact made Kelly practically illegitimate. Bridget did not know anyone else with divorced parents.

Kelly's father, Mr. Franklin, lived two houses away from Bridget. He had not remarried. Kelly's mother lived two miles away. She had remarried right after the divorce, and had given Kelly two half-brothers with a different last name. Bridget thought this was a disgrace.

Kelly's parents sparred over her and spoiled her. Kelly lived with her mother, but Bridget never knew when she would see Kelly's hated face in her own neighborhood.

And this day Kelly was to stab Bridget's finger.

Science class was supposed to start right after lunch. Bridget wished Mrs. Sanger would get on with it; she seemed to be stalling. Twelve thirty, twelve thirty-five. Mrs. Sanger was at her desk, writing. Bridget looked

at Kelly. Kelly was silently giggling, flinching from Karen Weed, who made slashing motions across her throat.

At last Mrs. Sanger said, "All right—get into your groups for the blood testing."

Bridget got up and went over to Kelly. As chairs scraped, the class began to talk a little.

"Don, te don ton," said Drumstick, to the tune of the *Dragnet* theme. Everyone was pink in the cheeks, except Bridget. Bridget was white.

"Which desk should we go to, Kelly, yours or mine?" Bridget asked. Her voice was cracking. She felt stupid; she already was standing by Kelly's desk.

Kelly did not answer. She kept talking to Karen Weed, describing her recent birthday party. Bridget felt angry with Kelly because she was ignoring Bridget and because she was hurting Karen. Why describe your own party?

Mrs. Sanger came up to them holding out two wrapped lancets. Bridget took one. Mrs. Sanger still held the other lancet.

"Kelly!" Mrs. Sanger said sharply.

Kelly jumped, then grinned. Kelly never looked disconcerted for long. She took the lancet.

Mrs. Sanger took a long time passing out supplies: lancets, bandages, alcohol swabs, glass

slides. Then she set up the big microscope at the front of the room. The class was silent.

"Any time you're ready!" said Mrs. Sanger, not looking at them.

Bridget and Kelly looked at one another. Bridget almost offered to go first, then stopped. She looked at Kelly's eyes. Kelly did not look beseeching—she could never allow herself to look that way. She looked—blank. She had forced the malice off her face. Bridget saw then that Kelly was at her mercy. Bridget could "accidentally" do anything she liked with that lancet.

If Bridget were to let Kelly stab her first, then Bridget could be mean if Kelly were mean. But Mrs. Sanger would know.

Then Bridget wondered why they had partners. Probably, most of the kids would be unable to stab themselves.

"On the count of three," said Drumstick to Margery Weir. Drumstick was laughing, and tears or sweat were running down his cheeks. "One, two, two and a half, three!" Drumstick's blow bounced off Margery's finger, not piercing the skin.

"Ow! You animal!" said Margery in real distress.

Kelly held out her hand.

"I think you should use the left hand," said Bridget in her cracking voice.

Kelly switched hands, and

Bridget began to swab one of Kelly's fingers with alcohol. She unwrapped a lancet. The wrapper fell to the floor and Kelly said, "Tsk!" When Bridget looked up, Kelly looked scared.

"On the count of three," said Bridget. "One, two, three." She pierced Kelly's fingertip. Kelly pulled away. A drop of blood bloomed out. Kelly gasped.

While Kelly smeared her blood on a glass slide, Bridget pierced her own finger. She had forgotten to sterilize the spot first, so she quickly wiped it with alcohol as the first blood came out. Then she squeezed out more blood. She felt happier than she had felt all year.

And she was happy when she learned her blood type: Type O, the kind most often mentioned on *Perry Mason*.

"I'm A!" said Karen Weed.

"I'm A too!" said Margery Weir, looking as though she had just been let out of prison.

"I'm AB!" said Kelly.

"I'm O!" said Drumstick. Bridget laughed out loud.

As she started home for the Thanksgiving weekend, Bridget saw Kelly meet her father. He was waiting for her outside the school gate. Bridget was disgusted to think that Kelly would be spending Thanksgiving two doors away.

Bridget was not tempted to

stay near Mr. Franklin for safety; he gave her the creeps. He was a bigot and an animal-killer. Bridget remembered once walking down the alley and seeing a dead deer hung from the ceiling of Mr. Franklin's garage. It was going to be cut up into roasts and steaks. She was sure Mr. Franklin had left the rollup door open to show off. A small crowd, mostly children, had gathered to look at the victim. The deer's eyes were open, and its mouth was open a little, too.

Even Bridget's father had been appalled. He never fought with his neighbors, yet he had had a few words for Mr. Franklin. Mr. Franklin claimed that hunting was a sport, and that the dead deer was a trophy.

"Don't talk to me about sport," Bridget's father had said. "You can hunt for the food, but don't tell me you can kill that beautiful thing that don't have a chance and talk about sport." Bridget thought her own dad wasn't really such a bad old stick.

She walked home slowly so that Kelly and Mr. Franklin stayed ahead of her. They were talking and laughing. They planned a nice Thanksgiving, it seemed. Bridget wondered if Mr. Franklin would buy a turkey or just shoot one.

Bridget saw a police car pulled up in front of her house. Her

father stood on the lawn, his hands in his pockets, talking to a policeman. He looked respectful.

"Ah, Bridget, come here," he said in an artificial way. "This is my dodder, Bridget," he said to the policeman. He did not introduce the policeman to Bridget.

"I'm Sergeant Swann," said the policeman.

Sergeant Swann was an oldish man, and he had an accent like someone from an animated cartoon. Boris Badanov.

"Are you Russian?" she asked.

"Bridget!" said her father.

"That's all right, Mr. Moore," said Swann. "Yes, Bridget, I'm Russian, or I was, rather. I'm American now, of course. Come and sit on the porch with me a minute. I'd like to talk to you."

He looked at Bridget's father. Bridget's father went into the house.

Swann and Bridget talked a long time. Bridget wanted to ask him why he was there. Instead, she asked him about a number of other subjects.

Swann's name had been cut from something longer and less pronounceable. He had come to the United States at sixteen, knowing no English. He could read and write Russian, but the Russians didn't use the same alphabet as Americans, so he had been virtually illiterate. He had enlisted in the army, an

army full of men who spoke little English and little or nothing of one another's languages. When he had left the army, he had been able to speak English and to read a little. In ten years, he had learned to read, write, and speak idiomatic English. Swann's mastery of English now extended to knowing the difference between "crevice" and "crevasse." He had been married for forty-four years; he had a grandson Bridget's age.

"Well, it's just the beginning of my shift, and I have quite a few more visits to make," he said. "Officer DeWeese may be around to see you in the next few days, Bridget; I'll be on midnights, starting Friday." He stood up. "You look pretty happy. Behave, now." He went and got into his car, checked his watch, and drove up the block.

Bridget went into the house. Her father immediately found her.

"What did you talk about?" he asked. "You were with him a solid hour."

"Nothing, really," said Bridget.

"*Nottin'*! Whadd'a mean, nottin'?"

"We talked mainly about his early adulthood," said Bridget precisely. "What did *you* talk about?"

"*Nottin'*. They're nervous about this rapist. That Swann has a bee in his bonnet, I think."

Bridget lay awake that night. Finally she turned on the light and began to read *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*. It was about a murder in late November with a chopping implement. (Was the rapist going to attack that November, or was he not? He had only three days left.) Mrs. Christie took Bridget's mind away from chopping implements and into village life. After fifty pages, Bridget was calm enough to sleep.

She dreamed she was in Mr. Franklin's house. She had never been in that house, but in her dream it was like her own house, except that Mr. Franklin had a rug with pictures of turkeys on it. (Was that a turkey carpet? Surely not.) Even in her dream, Bridget realized that Mr. Franklin's house really *was* like hers. The layout was the same. She could walk through any house on the block blindfolded. She could walk through the yards, turn on the outdoor faucets, go out to the garages—and get stuck again . . .

On Thanksgiving, Bridget ate two dinners and drank three glasses of wine. If she had any dreams that night, she couldn't remember them.

On Friday, the next to last day of November, she sat up straight in bed at seven. She did not know why. She was not thinking of anything in particular.

Bridget dressed and went out to the garage. Her hair was tangled, but she didn't care. She looked down at the doorknob that her father had screwed back on. She looked at the screws. Then she stepped into the garage and looked up at her father's screwdrivers. She took one down.

Bridget looked around. Mrs. Carr next door was taking her garbage out, and Bridget thought she never would finish the job. Mrs. Carr held the wastebasket to her chest as if she were a child with a teddy bear. She walked with a slow waddle. At last she came back from the alley holding the wastebasket the same way. She slowly returned to her house.

Then Bridget looked around again. Most of the neighborhood still slept. Hearing nothing but her own shoes on the alley stones, Bridget tiptoed to Mr. Franklin's back gate. She let herself into his yard and walked across the grass to the garage. She tried the door. Then she was standing inside Mr. Franklin's garage.

Yes, it was like her own. Except that Mr. Franklin kept his in order. Bridget's father was a pack rat; order in their garage was impossible.

No car. A big old wooden table in the center of the floor. A neat workbench with a fluorescent light over it; saws, ham-

mers, pliers, and screwdrivers on the wall. Rows of Muriel cigar tins, labeled "Washers," "Nuts," "Finishing Nails." The guns and hunting knives on the adjoining wall. A refrigerator in one corner, old, but humming. A big steel trunk, a deep freeze. The garage was heated. Oh! A deer's head on the wall!

A bell rang, and Bridget jumped. Was it an alarm?

It was a telephone. Why was there a telephone in the garage, and who was calling her? Someone must have seen her go in; someone was calling to scare her away.

The telephone stopped ringing. It was an extension, of course. Someone in the house had answered it. Mr. Franklin couldn't be sleeping now.

Should she run away? Was Mr. Franklin lying in bed talking, or was he looking out his kitchen window?

Bridget decided to take a chance. If he caught her, he probably would only yell at her. Bridget took her screwdriver over to the door knob.

That night she prepared herself. She mustn't fall asleep. She drank coffee, which she hated, and bit her nails. She clipped her fingernails short, and her toenails, too. She washed her hair and scrubbed herself well in the tub. She ate two bologna sand-

wiches, then drank more coffee. At midnight she sat by her bedroom window to watch. She wore jeans, sneakers, and two sweatshirts.

Perhaps she should read some more of *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*. But she might forget to look out the window. She longed to read. She was wasting her time, wasn't she?

Before three o'clock she saw a light in Mr. Franklin's house. It was the landing light, and it stayed on for four seconds.

Bridget saw someone come out of the house and cross the lawn to the garage. She felt her bowels wring. She slapped both hands to her mouth in a ridiculous gesture. Her breath was short.

Then she clumped down the stairs and out of the house. As she opened the back door she heard her father grumble in bed. She ran through the back yard and into the alley. She kept running, but she grew quiet.

Someone was in Mr. Franklin's garage with a flashlight. Bridget looked in a window and saw Kelly. Kelly lay on the big wooden table, twitching her face and putting her hands up to her eyes. Now the light from the refrigerator streamed over her. Mr. Franklin stood in front of the open refrigerator, drinking from a large bottle.

Bridget almost fell down. She

prayed instead, and her prayer was one word: *God* . . .

She dared to hope that she would be lucky. The door was open a crack. Perhaps earlier in the day Mr. Franklin had discovered that the knob needed to be fixed, but if so, he had forgotten to fix it. He had been thinking of other things.

He drank some more. His cold drink was clear, like water.

Bridget slipped into the garage. In two seconds she was at the center table, and she took the groggy Kelly's wrist. She yanked the girl off the table and dragged her out the door. Kelly's eyes popped open. They looked glazed and unnatural.

Bridget slammed the door and pulled the knob hard. It fell off, outside and in.

"Run, ya jackass!" screeched Bridget. Kelly was stupid with drink or some drug, but she ran with her knees bent while Bridget pulled.

Triumph filled Bridget even as she ran. Then she remembered. She never had tested the rollup door. Was it locked? Mr. Franklin had been standing right by it!

She heard Mr. Franklin's rollup door crash open. But she and Kelly were at Bridget's gate. The old cucumber frames . . . the dead peony bush . . . then they were on Bridget's landing. She slammed the back door and locked it. Outside,

someone ran into a garbage can.

"WHAT THE CHRIST IS GOING ON?" bellowed Bridget's father. He stood in the kitchen in his underwear.

He did not know that soon he would be bragging about his parenting. But Bridget thought already of the rewards to come. Like the benefit to her presidential campaign.

Bridget and Sergeant Swann did not have time for an informal talk till four days later. Officer DeWeese was there, too. Bridget had been talking to the police every day, but she had been answering questions. Now Swann discussed the case with her from another angle.

"It's not such a coincidence, really," Swann said. "If the rapist's pattern meant anything, then it came down to one of the thirteen girls in your class, Bridget."

"I know," she said.

"I'm not surprised. Well, I had an idea that there must be a reason for all this. If the bastard was some lunatic who couldn't help himself, why would he attack eleven-year-old girls in the eleventh month of the year and ditch their bodies after eleven days? It's been going on for eleven years; Kelly would have been the eleventh victim, and there he would stop. He

was too slick for his own good. He was supposed to look crazy, but he didn't look crazy to me. I bet he would have liked to kill 'em all on Armistice Day. But he would have made himself too easy to catch, or too easy for all the girls to avoid, that way."

"Veterans' Day," said DeWeese.

"Armistice Day," said Swann. "At any rate, I had this notion that there was more to it than met the eye. It looked to me like he was killing all his other victims to cover up for the one he really wanted to kill."

He continued, "But why would anyone want to kill an eleven-year-old girl? If a man has, say, a very rich brother, he might want to kill that brother's child. But why stretch it out over ten, eleven years? The brother might have a dozen more kids in that time. Besides, none of these little girls was what you would call an heiress. I didn't think it was money—which it usually is. The next most common motive is hate."

"You know," Bridget interrupted, "I thought those other murders might be to cover up the one important murder."

"Important murder!" said DeWeese, putting a hand up to his eyes. He was much younger than Swann, and more easily shocked.

"Hardly anyone took my idea seriously," said Swann, "be-

cause the victims were kids. And frankly I didn't know what to do with my hunch until the killer's pattern narrowed down. Then I started checking out all the families of the girls in your class. I never liked Franklin. He's a mean bastard, and he hates women. Hates his ex-wife like poison. Knew the third victim—they didn't have anything on him and he had an alibi—a lady with two black eyes! In the end, he was only questioned, and only that once. I talked to that lady yesterday. She now says she was lying, made me swear up and down that I was telling the truth about Franklin not making bail. We'll tie him into some of the other girls, too. It just takes work. Knows how to use some awfully big knives—can own 'em and have a good explanation for it—his hunting. And from the babbling he's been doing the past few days, I get the idea he thinks Kelly isn't his own kid, which is silly. They look alike."

"They have the same blood type," said Bridget. "It's a real rare one."

"How—?" said DeWeese.

"Well that doesn't prove it, but I find it interesting," said Swann. "She's the apple of her mother's eye, and there's your motive. Gonna wipe out the bad seed, is he? Killing and raping children. Not that he even prefers children—he doesn't even

have that excuse. Made a *game* out of it, by God!"

"He—did he—" said Bridget.

"What's that, dear?" Swann asked.

"Did he—confess?"

"No, dear. I hope he does."

Bridget did not want him to confess. Or did she? On *Perry Mason* the killer didn't confess until the very end. But she liked *Dragnet*, too.

"He left hairs and, er, other stuff at the other rapes," Swann said. "We got samples of his hair out of a brush in the house. And off his pillow. And we found a semen sample in his wastebasket, in what's called a prophyl—"

"Swannie!" said DeWeese. "She's just a kid."

"She's going to hear about it, you know. We're going to hang him with it."

"Talking like that to a kid," said DeWeese.

"By the way, we also talked to *that* lady—the current girlfriend, I mean," said Swann. "She's scared to death of him, too. Absolutely relieved that he's locked up. What a lot of good character witnesses he's going to have."

"Won't I get to testify?" Bridget asked forlornly.

"Well, dear," Swann said, "that's not our decision. They have Kelly and you if they need you. By the way, where did you get the idea that the other mur-

ders were camouflage?"

"It was in *The ABC Murders*," said Bridget.

"Yes! It was!" said Swann. "That one was for money, I think. Well, we need cops that think more like kids." He winked. "And one more thing," said Swann. "What made you think of the garage?"

"I knew about the knives and the deep freeze," said Bridget. "He kills animals."

"There you have it," said Swann.

When Swann and DeWeese were alone, DeWeese said, "I think you should watch what you say around that kid. You're too graphic."

Swann had his reasons. He liked Bridget. Besides, he needed practice in persuasion. His grandson, like Bridget, wanted to be a criminal defense attorney. Swann was trying to talk him out of it.

Swann said, "You never finished your story about how Franklin retained Vander-

haven. How did he come to do anything so stupid?"

"Well, I offered to get him a lawyer and he said O'Connor was his lawyer. I said O'Connor didn't practice criminal law, but Miss O'Connor did. If she'd take the case. Well, I thought he'd take my head off!"

"Did you?"

"So I said, just for laughs, 'I suppose you think you can afford Vanderhaven.' And he said he wanted Vanderhaven."

"Amazing," said Swann. "It seems almost unfair. But, *ma foi*, murder is not a game!"

"Now who are you quoting?" asked DeWeese.

"Forget it. You'd spread it around, and they'd probably make me retire."

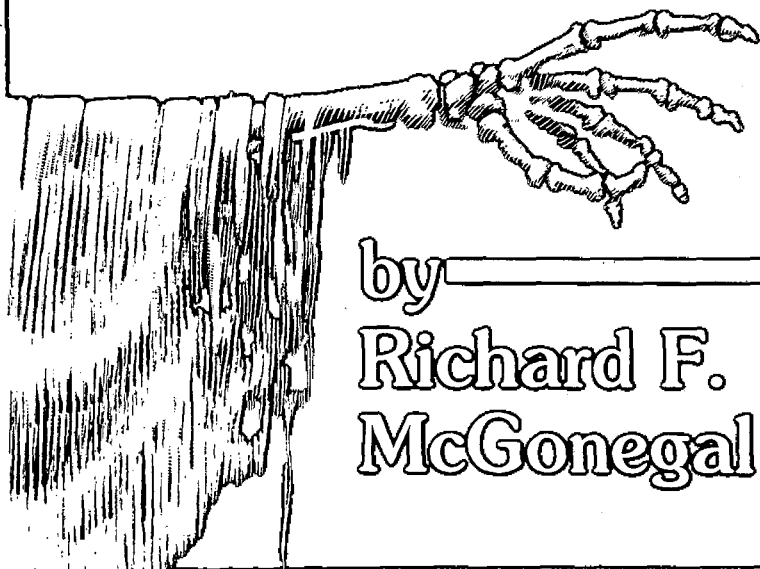
Bridget became a prosecutor. Her conviction record is so good that she is a local legend. Her father sees a problem with this.

"Why don't you run for Congress or somethin'?" he asks.

She will, of course. She's thirty, and Congress seems the next logical step.

FICTION

The Grin —Reaper



by —
Richard F.
McGonegal

Miss Alice was a "bumper." Whenever she wanted to get someone's attention, she bumped with her wheelchair. She bumped doors, shins, even other wheelchairs—including mine.

I was parked in the lobby, my favorite locale within the confines of Oak Forest Manor Care Center, on the Monday after-

noon when Miss Alice bumped against the waist-high wall of Mrs. Wallace's work station.

Mrs. Wallace peered over the frames of her eyeglasses, over the wall of the work station, and down at Miss Alice. "Yes?" she said, obviously preoccupied with her duties. Despite the tortoise-shell eyeglasses, the hair pinned up beneath the nurse's cap, and the stiff, shapeless white uniform, Mrs. Wallace remained beautiful. Her smile revealed dainty dimples and her cheeks effused a rosy blush, enhanced of late by the crisp autumnal air. She was young, vibrant, and curvaceous, although she labored diligently to disguise those attributes. We suspected—and gossiped—that she tried to create an impression of professional efficiency. Her efforts, however, were hardly necessary. During her eight year tenure as director of the nursing home, neither her professionalism nor her efficiency had ever been called into question.

"Is The Grin Reaper coming tonight?" Miss Alice asked, flashing a broad smile. Her smile, like her bumping, was habitual. It revealed rows of pristine white dentures which contrasted with her pale, shriveled lips and yellowing, wrinkled skin. She was wrapped in her customary lavender robe

and seated on her chromium-frame wheelchair. The visual effect bordered on surrealism. I was compelled to consider that if Salvador Dali had ever selected old folks as subject matter, the finished canvas assuredly would bear a striking resemblance to Miss Alice.

"Yes, he's coming," Mrs. Wallace replied. "It's been posted on the board for a week," she added, motioning to the bulletin board on the wall across from her work station.

Miss Alice, however, was off and wheeling before Mrs. Wallace had finished her addendum. "Oh, I must tell the others. They'll be so thrilled," she said, as she rolled past me on her way to the plexiglass-fronted recreation room. The automatic doors slid open as she announced: "News, everyone."

I resisted the temptation to call out that everyone already knew of the scheduled visit. It had been the talk of Oak Forest for the past week, and Miss Alice had certainly been among the talkers. Still, Miss Alice was nothing if not forgetful, and although it was often frustrating, we all tended to indulge her when she announced her "news."

The Grin Reaper was known on every day except Halloween as Zachariah Selby Peters, Jr. He earned his nickname when

he first swept into the recreation room at Oak Forest Manor Care Center two Halloweens ago dressed as the harbinger of death.

His appearance had elicited a number of gasps—most noticeably from Miss Alice and Miroslav Miskov—but it was Zachariah Selby Peters, Jr., who turned out to be the most shocked and embarrassed of the group.

He confessed he had never even considered the impact his costume might have on an enclave of septuagenarians and octogenarians. He apologized profusely and offered to leave.

In an attempt to assuage our own embarrassment, we pleaded with him to stay, and the resulting party was so atypically enjoyable that we invited him to reprise his role on succeeding Halloweens. It was Miskov, the native of Estonia, who—with chance exactitude born of characteristic mispronunciation—dubbed our guest “The Grin Reaper.”

Zachariah Selby Peters, Jr., was a chip off the old block, the old block being one of our fellow “tenants”: Zachariah Selby Peters, Sr., known to us as “Big Pete.”

I was stationed at my usual vantage point in the lobby on a sunny March day nearly two and a half years ago when Big

Pete first hobbled through the doorway, followed by his son.

“Howdy, miss,” the elder man had said, addressing Mrs. Wallace. “Name’s Big Pete.” He leaned his massive two hundred forty pound, six foot frame on his wooden crutches and offered her a large, calloused hand. She winced as she shook it.

“Howdy, pardner,” he said, turning to me. “What ya in for?”

“Five to ten for arthritis,” I said. He laughed and shook my hand gently; I smiled. I liked him immediately.

“Where’s my manners?” he asked. “This here’s my boy, but he don’t take to being called ‘Little Pete.’”

“Call me Zach,” the son said. We—Zach, Mrs. Wallace, and I—exchanged handshakes. I liked Zach, too, and I sensed that Mrs. Wallace, despite her disapproving look, also liked them both.

I guessed Zach to be in his mid-thirties, about half his dad’s age. Although father and son shared similar facial features, Zach was taller and much lankier—a younger, stretched-out version of his sire.

“Well, Zach,” Big Pete intoned loudly as he hobbled around the lobby, “whaddya think?”

“Seems nice,” Zach replied.

“Nice!” Big Pete bellowed.

"Why, it's a goddamn palace. Look at these floors, clean as a new ball bearin'; look at this glass," he rapped on the plexiglass, "why it's clear as . . ." he shrugged, "clear as glass." He paused and stared at Mrs. Wallace. "And I'll have this purdy lady to watch over me, keep me in line. Yep, I sure could get used to hangin' my hat in a place like this."

I knew immediately that Big Pete wouldn't "fit in" with the clientele at Oak Forest. We were, for the most part, the established "old money" elderly of the community. We were perceived as the sophisticated, the genteel, the wealthy, and the boring. I suspected Big Pete was none of the above. In short, he was everything we needed to add a little zest to our cloistered world.

Still, my better judgment told me Mrs. Wallace would never open our doors to a piker, particularly since Oak Forest was a private facility which received no government subsidies.

After overhearing Mrs. Wallace explain the rates to Big Pete, I learned that my earlier suspicions were only seventy-five percent correct. Although Big Pete was neither sophisticated, genteel, nor boring, he was wealthy.

"Why, that's peanuts, little lady," he roared in response,

then went on to explain in detail how he had converted a back yard mechanic's shed into a thriving business, Big Pete's Farm Machinery Sales and Service.

Mrs. Wallace gave Big Pete the grand tour, he signed the required documents, and when he moved in a few days later, the fun began.

The first item on Big Pete's agenda was organizing a surreptitious late night poker game. Miss Alice, Miskov, Hortense Diekroeger, and I would all sneak into Big Pete's room after "lights out," Big Pete would jam a wadded-up towel beneath the door and duct-tape the door-frame to mask any telltale light, and the game would begin.

I had expected Big Pete would be a cagey card player, and Hortense, I knew, was a wily old bird, so I was counting on Miss Alice and Miskov to be the easy marks. Again, I was only seventy-five percent correct.

The first hand, dealt by Big Pete, was five card stud, nothing wild. Hortense and Miskov had folded, Miss Alice had a pair of eights, an ace, and a four showing, and Big Pete had a pair of jacks. I had one king up and one in the hole. Big Pete and I exchanged repeated raises, oblivious to Miss Alice, who seemed to be naively kicking in cash.

Finally, I called.

"You're lookin' at it—jacks," Big Pete said.

"Two kings," I announced, triumphantly, unearthing the buried monarch and reaching for the pot.

"Not so fast," Miss Alice countered. "Dead man's hand—aces and eights," she proclaimed, flipping over her ace in the hole.

When the game concluded at two A.M., Miss Alice proved to be the big winner, a feat she duplicated in subsequent games.

Although our fivesome eagerly awaited the twice-weekly poker games, Big Pete remained restless. He would sit in the recreation room like a scolded three-year-old, his pent-up energy begging for release, watching us as we watched television or played checkers.

One spring afternoon about six weeks after his arrival, he rolled into the recreation room in a wheelchair, a basketball in his lap. "Who's up for a little hoop?" he asked, dribbling the ball beside the chair.

"I'm game," I said. "Where'd you get the wheelchair?"

"Commandeered it from the stockroom."

"What's hoop?" Miss Alice inquired.

"Basketball," Big Pete replied.

"We don't have a net," Miskov observed.

"We do now," Big Pete said,

revealing a smile so broad it wrinkled the skin beneath his eyes.

We wheeled, hobbled, and walked into the parking lot, where Zach was standing on the roof of his pickup truck, busily fastening a net to the basketball rim and backboard he had screwed into the facade of Oak Forest Manor Care Center.

"Mrs. Wallace isn't going to like this," I ventured.

Big Pete dismissed my observation with a wave of the hand. "Miskov, Hortense, and the rest of you, go swipe some more wheelchairs and we'll get rollin'," he called out.

When we were all assembled and suitably seated, Big Pete designated Miss Alice and me as team captains, since we were the most proficient in maneuvering wheelchairs. We chose sides and Big Pete explained the rules. There were two, as follows: "Everything's legal except tippin' over someone else's chair, which constitutes a foul; and anyone who can figure out how to slam dunk a shot from one of these contraptions automatically wins the game for his or her team."

The game was a disaster. We bumped and thudded into one another's chairs, knocked the wind out of our teammates with our passes, and lost the ball into the street fourteen times. But

the laughter—never in my years at Oak Forest had I heard such an outpouring of childlike giggles or seen such tears of glee from our group.

Our boisterous merriment eventually drew Mrs. Wallace to the parking lot. She eyed us sternly at first, but quickly softened. The spirit of the scene was not lost on her, and before our game ended, she was cheering every basket. Under Zach's tutelage, Mrs. Wallace became our referee and, in our second season, we designated her as manager. She recently organized our first road game against Green Meadows Skilled Nursing Facility, which we won 26-14.

Big Pete's exuberance was contagious. Miss Alice, who talked incessantly about the fabulous desserts she once made for dinner guests, started a cooking class. Miskov, a jeweler prior to retirement, began fixing watches and repairing and resetting jewelry for the tenants. Hortense offered ballroom dancing instruction for those who were ambulatory, and I, a former banker, favored my avocation over my vocation and organized fishing trips.

Our ever-increasing activities gained not only Mrs. Wallace's blessing—which we required—but also her assistance. She and Herb, the handy-

man, either individually or collectively, served as our chauffeurs, aides, and cheerleaders.

Mrs. Wallace possessed a good heart, but her motivation was not entirely altruistic; she also reaped significant benefits from our rejuvenation. We suffered a few bumps and scrapes from the basketball games, an occasional bruised foot from Hortense's dancing lessons, and several minor burns from Miss Alice's cooking classes, but the major maladies, once so common among the tenants, all but disappeared.

My arthritis abated, Miskov's bad heart thumped with vigorous regularity, Miss Alice's bouts of forgetfulness improved a bit, and Big Pete—whose degenerative muscle disease should have confined him to bed months ago, according to his doctors—continued to hobble along ably on his crutches.

As a further testament to our regeneration, no one had passed away since Big Pete's arrival. Death, once commonplace at Oak Forest, had been temporarily exiled, if not banished. And the appearance of The Grin Reaper, which initially had shocked, was now eagerly awaited as cause for yet another festive evening.

Like expectant children lying

awake on Christmas Eve listening for the sound of hoofbeats, we had gathered in the recreation room to greet The Grin Reaper.

Miss Alice and her protégés had baked Halloween cookies bedecked with orange and black icing and concocted the punch, spiked liberally by Big Pete; Hortense had selected the music, which ranged from Bobby "Boris" Pickett's "Monster Mash" to Michael Jackson's "Thriller"; and Miskov and I had constructed the decorations, a traditional assortment of witches, skeletons, and black cats, enhanced by scattered jack-o-lanterns and orange and black streamers.

Nature had contributed a suitably "dark and stormy night," and Mrs. Wallace was at her work station, diligently watching us while appearing to be otherwise occupied.

The door—seemingly rent by the forces of the wind—sprang open. Miss Alice gasped. Amidst a fury of swirling leaves and rippling black robes, The Grin Reaper entered. He walked rapidly and authoritatively into the recreation room, robes flowing, skeletal face masked in the shadow of his dark hood.

We laughed, albeit nervously. Zach, I considered, had outdone himself. He looked genuinely malevolent.

Miskov patted him on the shoulder and The Grin Reaper turned his head, emitting a dull squeak. It sounded like the rasping of bone on bone. I shuddered.

Hortense offered him cookies and punch, which he brushed aside with a wave of his slender arm. She stepped back and eyed him curiously.

The Grin Reaper stared at her momentarily, then at me—seeing but remaining unseen. His face was a ghostly, featureless visage hidden in hooded shadow. His gaze held me entranced, chilling me.

He turned to Miskov, to Big Pete (who smiled proudly), to another and another. When his stare finally settled on Miss Alice, he held it for what seemed a long time before he raised his arm and pointed a bony finger at her.

She wheeled toward him; he opened the door and followed her down the corridor.

"Goddamn," Big Pete said. "Zach's doin' a hell of a job tonight. Even gave me the heebie-jeebies."

"Where're they going?" I asked, trying to mask the alarm that was battling to overcome my common sense.

"I dunno," Big Pete replied. His tone indicated he too harbored some concern.

"We go maybe and should

check on them," Miskov offered.

"Oh, don't be silly," Hortense said. "We can't just . . . well, maybe if we had some kind of reason."

"What if we . . ." I began, halting in mid-sentence as the front door was flung open and The Grin Reaper entered anew. He walked confidently into the recreation room, black robes swirling, face masked in shadow.

"Where's Miss Alice?" Big Pete asked.

"What?" replied The Grin Reaper. He sounded confused.

"Miss Alice, where is she?" Big Pete repeated.

"Dunno," The Grin Reaper said. "I just got here."

A collective murmur arose, then quieted as Big Pete asked: "What do you mean 'you just got here'?"

"Damn lucky to be here, too," The Grin Reaper said. "Lost the accelerator spring on my pickup as I was comin' down Overlook Road. Ran off the road through the drainage ditch and came within about fifteen feet of goin' off that bluff. Look at me, I'm still shakin'." He extended his hand as visible proof.

"You bluffin' me?" Big Pete asked. He cocked his head in a threatening, but paternal gesture which demanded the truth.

"I'm serious, Pop." He scanned our faces. "What's goin' on?"

"C'mon!" Big Pete ordered. We funneled through the automatic sliding doors and spread out, mob-like, across the corridor as we marched, wheeled, and hobbled to Miss Alice's room. Mrs. Wallace, firing questions at us, scurried alongside.

Big Pete halted outside Miss Alice's room, then flung the door open. The room was dark, but light from the corridor spilled inside and illuminated the outline of The Grin Reaper as he extended his hand toward Miss Alice's bosom.

"Out," Big Pete demanded. The Grin Reaper stopped in mid-reach and stared at us. Miss Alice remained immobile, apparently transfixed. "I said: Out!" Big Pete shouted.

Miss Alice turned, as if startled into consciousness. She wheeled herself into the corridor.

"You, too," Big Pete ordered.

The Grin Reaper stepped into the doorway, filling it. Big Pete held his ground. He looked from The Grin Reaper in the doorway to The Grin Reaper among us in the corridor.

"You cook this up, Zach?" he asked the latter.

Zach removed his hood, revealing a face encased in white makeup. Black circles surrounded his eye sockets and dark shadows accentuated his

cheekbones. He shook his head.

"Then what the hell is goin' on?" Big Pete asked no one in particular, his tone fraught with exasperation.

"He needs . . ." Miss Alice began, her voice wavering, "... he needs to take someone from here. We used to have people going to him regularly, but we haven't had any for some time now. So he came to visit, to take someone. But he can take only one tonight. Only one. All he has to do is touch your heart. He can reach inside you and touch your heart, and then . . ." Her words trailed wearily off.

"You can take anyone?" Big Pete asked, addressing the hooded figure in the doorframe.

The Grim Reaper—whose aspect had become even more decidedly grim—nodded.

"Then I'm your man," Big Pete said, poking himself in the chest. "Take me."

The Grim Reaper stared.

"Go ahead," Big Pete challenged, dropping his arms to his side.

The Grim Reaper advanced, then halted as Miskov surged from the crowd and stepped in front of Big Pete. "I the person to take," he said. "I ready."

Hortense stepped ahead of Miskov. "Me," she said, defiantly.

Big Pete rolled his eyes. "This

is gettin' ridiculous," he said.

The Grim Reaper gazed at each member of the trio, evidently confused by the spirit of volunteerism.

I rolled forward, making it a foursome. "I'm the one to take," I said.

"Goddamn," I heard Big Pete say.

"Just a minute," Mrs. Wallace interrupted, advancing from the group. She stared at The Grim Reaper. "You can take only one person tonight, right?"

The Grim Reaper nodded.

"And you can only take that person by touching the heart, correct?"

Again The Grim Reaper nodded.

"Okay," she said, turning to us. "Since we have such an abundance of volunteers, the only way to settle this is to go back to the recreation room and find a way to choose democratically."

"Democratically?" Big Pete asked with a sarcastic chuckle.

"You have a better idea?" Mrs. Wallace said.

Big Pete shrugged.

"Okay," she said. "Then let's go."

We retraced our path down the corridor and funneled back into the recreation room. "You," Mrs. Wallace said, halting The Grim Reaper near her work sta-

tion, "wait here." The Grim Reaper loomed at her threateningly, but he obliged.

When we tenants and Zach had assembled within the recreation room, Mrs. Wallace reached over the wall of her work station and flipped a switch. The automatic doors slid closed and sealed.

"Oh no," I whispered, stung by the immediate realization that Mrs. Wallace and The Grim Reaper were on the outside while all of us were locked inside.

Big Pete grabbed a chair and swung it at the plexiglass, but it bounced back harmlessly. We shouted as he swung the chair again to no avail, then watched in silent horror as Mrs. Wallace closed her eyes, tilted her head back slightly and offered her bosom to The Grim Reaper.

The hooded figure reached, his bony fingers outstretched. His hand seemed to dematerialize inside her chest, then his body pulsed as if lit by a strobe-like X-ray, revealing a skeletal shape beneath the robes and hood.

The pulsations, hammering

with the regularity of a heartbeat, magnified; the illuminations intensified; the bony jaw betrayed an agonized grimace.

The Grim Reaper withdrew his hand and scowled, somehow foiled. He clutched his robes and stormed out the front door.

Mrs. Wallace opened her eyes and smiled serenely. She flipped the switch to unlock the automatic doors and entered the recreation room.

We stared at her, mouths agape.

"What happened?" Big Pete asked.

"I tricked him," Mrs. Wallace said calmly. "He said he could take only one person and had to touch the heart," she explained. "But he couldn't take me without taking someone else, and he couldn't take that someone else because there's no heart to touch yet."

I pondered a moment before the revelation struck me. "You're pregnant!" I shouted.

Mrs. Wallace nodded, evincing a girlish smile. "I've been meaning to tell you," she said. "I was just waiting for the right moment."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



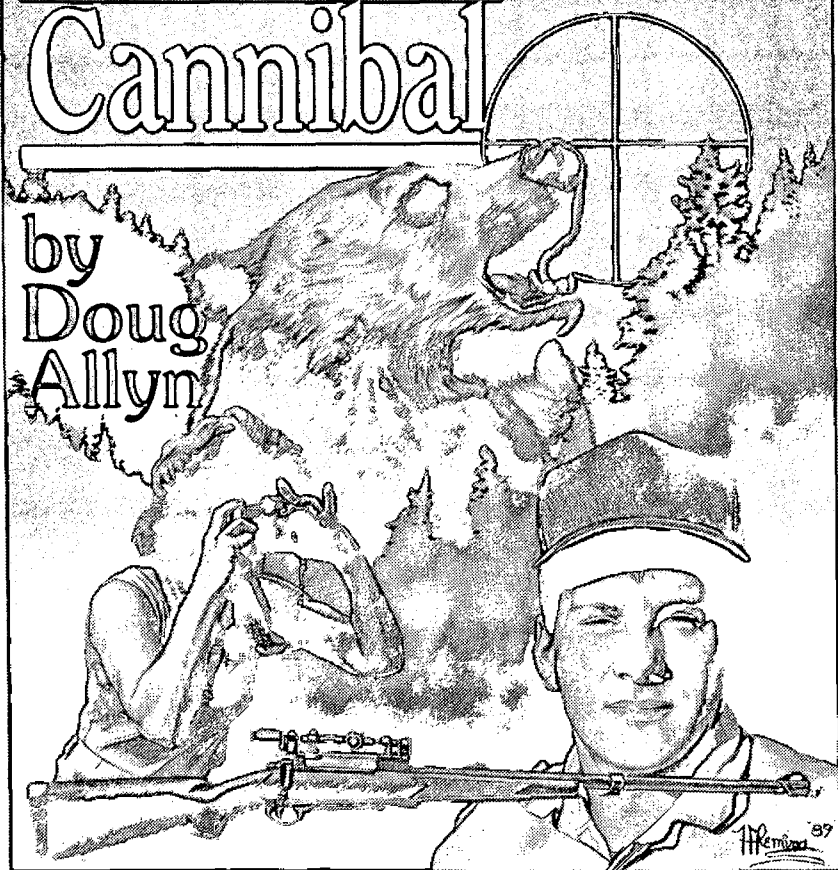
Photo by George Ingersoll

Heads, you lose. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

Cannibal

by
Doug
Allyn



66 **H**ow big is it?" Brecker whispered.

"Twelve, maybe thirteen hundred pounds," Walsh said. "A Kodiak, male I think. Big one. Look for yourself."

Brecker cursed softly, then

lowered his bulk to the ground and belly-crawled up the last few feet of the stony, snow-dusted ridge, cradling his rifle in the crooks of his elbows. Walsh passed him the binoculars and Brecker peered cautiously over the crest. Eighty

meters below them, a giant, coarse-coated brown bear shambled along the icy bank of a shallow stream, squinting nearsightedly into the water, searching for salmon.

Brecker eyed him for a moment, then rolled over on his back, breathing heavily. "Big," he panted, "not record book size though, right?"

Walsh took a long, slow breath before he answered, gazing across the rock strewn valley to the foothills of the Kuskokwim range, using the beauty of the bear and the Alaskan spring to cool his temper. "It may not make the list in Boone and Crockett, but it's a damn fine bear, probably stand twelve feet tall if you have him mounted upright. It'll make a helluva trophy."

"I've got trophies, kid," Brecker said, fumbling in his hunting coat for a narrow Cuban cigar, "more'n you can count. This time I want my name in that book. Now is that sucker record size or not?"

"Might be," Walsh sighed. "They judge the records by skull size. If you want to be absolutely sure, you'd better trot down there and measure it. I'll wait."

Brecker shielded the cigarillo from the wind, lit it, and sucked the smoke deep into his lungs. "How much does your Injun

boss pay you to guide, Walsh? A hundred a day? Two?" He coughed against the bite of the smoke. Down the slope, the Kodiak looked up, then slowly swiveled his massive head, muzzle twitching, showing flashes of fang, sniffing the wind.

"What I get paid is my business," Walsh said, "but if you don't put out that smoke, you're gonna spook your bear."

"He's not my bear," Brecker said, "he's not record size."

"No? You're sure?"

"Damn right. If he was, you'd be in mid-orgasm by now, sonny. You're not so he's not. Look, I got five days left on this trip, and to be honest, it ain't near as much fun as it used to be. Maybe I'm gettin' to that age where I gotta save my legs to chase the ladies. So I'll tell you what, you find a record bear and shoot it for me, I'll give you, say, ten grand under the table."

Walsh glanced at the older man. "Are you serious?"

"Son, I never joke about money. Ten thousand to get my name into the record book."

"Don't tell me, let me guess. You'll mail me a check from Oklahoma or wherever, right?"

"Jesus, you got a sour outlook for such a young squirt. Nope, I'll pay cash on delivery. Ten thou. Whaddya say?"

"I can't shoot it for you,"

Walsh said slowly. "I could lose my license."

"Fine, I'll shoot the damn thing," Brecker said, "you just find it for me. But don't be too long about it, I ain't a patient man." He lumbered to his feet, flipped a salute to the bear, and began working his way back down the slope to the horses, cigar clamped between his teeth. In the valley, the Kodiak whuffed and stood upright, a living mountain of muscle and bone, grunting a warning at the ridge above.

"No problem, big fella," Walsh sighed, "we were just leaving."

Walsh was rubbing down the horses when Billy Pitka's party rode in, dragging a mammoth moosehead on the aluminum travois behind Pitka's pony. Ehmke, the West German, was babbling excitedly at Kimura, the Japanese steel king, recounting the saga of the kill for probably the umpteenth time, judging from the glazed smile on Kimura's face. Walsh helped the Indian guide unsaddle his mounts; then the two of them lugged the glazed-eyed moosehead into the stable out of the wind. They rested the antlers on the floor, spread the animal's cape, and began scraping away the residue of suet and muscle tissue still clinging

to the steaming hide with their broad-bladed skinning knives, working expertly and in silence. Ehmke and Kimura watched for a while, then sauntered off to the prefab log cabin to celebrate the kill.

"Had to leave the carcass behind," Pitka grunted. "Big sow brown bear showed up before I even got the head off, ready for lunch. Fired off a couple rounds, but she wouldn't spook."

"They're not afraid of gunfire any more," Walsh nodded. "All it means to them is a fresh kill. How big was the sow?"

"Ten foot maybe. Big enough I wasn't gonna argue. Why?"

"I showed Brecker a twelve foot brownie male today and he passed it up. Says he wants a record bear. Offered me ten grand for one."

"He good for it, you think?" Pitka frowned.

"I'd say so. I see his name in the financial section sometimes. He's a heavyweight corporate raider, owns companies worth maybe a billion, and I've seen his poker pots hit three grand. You spot any Boone and Crockett bears lately?"

"Haven't seen one," Pitka said, rocking back on his heels, "but I know where there might be one. Not a brownie, though, a griz."

"Wouldn't matter to Brecker, he only wants his name in the

friggin' book. Tell me about the bear."

"Probably a crossbreed, half brownie, half griz, but it's hangin' out in a box canyon in the Kuskokwim, near the Nowatina, so B&C would count it as a grizzly. It's gotta be big. It's a cannibal."

"A cannibal?"

"Happens sometimes. A male grizzly'll kill another one durin' matin' season, develop a taste for the meat and the fightin', start huntin' other bears for food. I come across two carcasses in the past few weeks in that canyon, one of 'em a ten foot sow, damn near ripped to pieces."

"And you think this — cannibal might still be around?"

"No reason for him to move on. Plenty of bears in that canyon. Ain't said nothin' about it 'cause I was afraid the German'd wanta try for him and the sonofabitch can't shoot. Took him six rounds to bring down this moose and I still had to finish it for him. Can Brecker shoot?"

"He's not bad. His brother-in-law's better, but I think Mr. B.'ll want this guy all to himself. If we take the bear I'll split whatever I get with you."

"Damn right you will," Billy said sourly, spitting a brown stream through the broken pickets of his front teeth, "less

you wanna end up skinned out like this here moose. Tell you somethin' though, you watch your ass up that canyon, Walsh. Bears get pushy when other bears crowd 'em, and there's enough of 'em in the Kuskokwim now they're all on the prod damn near all the time."

"Yeah," Walsh sighed, glancing at the cabin, "I know the feeling."

Pitka wiped his knife clean on the hide and slipped it into his belt sheath. "You finish this dude off and horse it into the icehouse. I better get lunch on the table before they get a hand started. Wouldn't want Brecker to lose all his cash 'fore we get our cut."

No such luck. By the time Walsh finished with the moose and wandered up to the cabin the others had already eaten and the game was well under way. The men seated at the rough pine table in their long underwear were a study in contrasts. Curt Brecker, square-faced and -bodied, redneck handsome, fiftyish and fading, face weathering, hair going gray, thinning out. Worn shaggy to compensate. Charlie Hudleston, Brecker's brother-in-law, a ferret, narrow-jawed, with thick horn-rimmed glasses that enlarged his wary eyes. Ernst Ehmke, six six and three

hundred-plus pounds of suet *torte*, a dark bush of goatee surrounding a moist, amphibian's mouth. Ehmke'd brought a matched set of heavy rifles, Holland and Hollands, more suited to Africa than Alaska, but couldn't shoot for spit. Hiro Kimura was probably the best physical specimen in the lot. Sixtyish, perhaps seventy, sal-low skin flecked with liver spots, the old samurai was slim and hard as bamboo. He'd brought fine weapons also, but seemed more interested in the lichens clinging to the barren rocks than the bear and moose Pitka'd shown him. He always had an excuse for not shooting, and so far hadn't killed anything but the fifth of fine malt scotch Brecker'd given him the first day.

The last of the group, Tim (call me Big Mac) MacGowan, a squat beer barrel of a union boss from New Jersey, made no pretense of being in Alaska to hunt. He'd brought no weapons and his L.L. Bean cold weather gear was still wearing price tags. Like Ehmke and Kimura, he was really here to deal with Brecker.

Now and then Brecker would huddle with one of his guests by the potbellied woodstove, voices low, eyes alight, probably muttering about millions, but discreetly, with no refer-

ence to business any other time. They hunted in the mornings and late afternoons, but mostly they drank steadily, and played high stakes cutthroat poker, five card stud, draw, or spit-in-the-ocean, for more money than the guides would see in a year.

The five of them were hard at it now, ringing the rough pine dining table, cigars aglow, drinks at hand. None of them glanced up when Walsh came in.

He helped himself to a cup of stew from the three-burner propane hotplate and carried it over to the potbellied stove where Pitka was slouched, feet up, honing his skinning knife. The Indian camp boss's face was a mahogany mask of concentration, focused totally on steel and stone, a tumbler of straight scotch on the floor beside his chair.

"Anybody said anything about going out again this afternoon?" Walsh said, easing down across from him.

"Nope," Pitka grunted, "I think they're done for the day. Way they're sluggin' down the juice, probably best. Got a buzz on the shortwave little bit ago, we got a plane comin' in this afternoon."

"Out of rotation? We're not due for a drop until they pick up Ehmke at the end of the week."

"We got a three, four day fog comin', so he's gonna stop early, make sure we got enough booze, and dump off another client. Veenhuis. You know him?"

"No. One of Brecker's people?"

"Must be. Probably need new blood for the game. I think Ehmke's gotta bust pretty soon. He's dropped a bundle."

"Ehmke could probably drop a mil a day for a year and not miss it. What about this cannibal? You want me to scout him up this afternoon?"

"Nah, better go in the morning. You get caught out there in bad light with that sumbitch he'll likely get you and the horse both and my insurance'll go up. You unload the plane when it comes in, I'll cook supper if anybody wants any. Meantime, clean up Ehmke's cannon. He ran enough ammo through it to plug up a drain-pipe."

"They really shouldn't turn guys like him loose up here," Walsh said, sipping his stew. "Too tough on the environment."

"You don't need a friggin' degree to get 'turned loose' up here, college boy," Pitka said evenly. "All you need is the money to pay your way, which Ehmke's got. Which means he gets yessirred and nosirred and after he shoots up the country-

side he gets his rifle cleaned so's he can do it again tomorrow. So just clean the damn gun and spare me the lecture, okay? I gotta take stuff from them, I don't need any from you."

"No problem," Walsh shrugged. "Okay if I finish my lunch first?"

He took his time cleaning Ehmke's weapon. Alone in the rough board entryway outside the front door, surrounded by a small fortune in hunting arms, Walsh found sanctuary from the abrasive closeness of other men. He savored the tang of powder solvent, the beauty of meticulously engraved maple and steel. Art, in the pursuit of . . . pursuit. Ehmke'd complained about leaving his guns in the entryway gunracks with the others until Pitka'd roared that any weapon carried into the cabin would sweat, then freeze up when carried outside again, useless as tits on a tree.

The clients took Pitka's moods and abuse good-humoredly for the most part. After all, the dour camp boss was only an Indian, with no grasp of the real world. Walsh knew better, and though he didn't take Pitka's guff personally any more, a few months of it at a time was enough. With an extra five thou, maybe he could blow off the rest of the season, do a trek on his

own north into the Kaiyuhs, a little exploring—

A faint bumblebee drone pricked the bubble of his daydream. He wiped down Ehmke's H&H and put it back in the rack, making sure it was beside its own ammo, then shrugged into his parka and went down to meet the plane.

The base camp cabin stood on a rocky bluff on the south fork of the Tonzona River, a hundred yards from a small inland lake that provided salmon and moose during the season and served as a landing strip year round. The twin engine Beech came in higher than normal to avoid the mist moving down from the broken peaks of the Kuskokwim Mountains, did a quick pass over the lake to scan for obstacles, then wheeled into a near stall and dropped onto the water like a skimming stone, a landing guaranteed to disembark passengers so grateful to be back on solid ground that they wouldn't notice the crudeness of their four grand a week wonderland. The pilot goosed the Beech alongside the floating dock and held her there, engine grumbling, impatient to be away.

Walsh popped the cargo door and began unloading the half dozen or so boxes marked for Pitka's camp. One of the passengers scrambled out onto the

pontoon, grabbed a ditty bag from the cockpit, timed the rise and fall of the plane, and stepped onto the dock.

"Which gun case is yours?" Walsh asked.

"None of them," she said, "just grab that shoulder bag and the camera case."

"What?"

"The camera case and—"

"I mean what the hell do you think you're doing? You can't get off here."

"I'm already off," she said, "so just grab the case—"

"You don't understand, we don't have facilities here for women, we're—"

"Facilities? You mean like a nunnery?"

"I mean like bedrooms or bathrooms or anything else."

"It's okay, I promise not to peek," she said, reaching past Walsh, retrieving her bags.

"Dammit, lady—" Walsh began.

"Hey! On or off, okay?" the pilot yelled. "I ain't got all god-damn day."

The woman slammed the cargo hatch shut and slapped it twice. Walsh grabbed for the latch but the Beech was already in motion, engines revving to a roar, gunning toward open water for its takeoff run.

"Terrific," Walsh grunted, watching it go, "just terrific."

"Carla Veenhuis," the woman

said, extending her mitten.

"Rob Walsh," he said, accepting her hand reluctantly. "Look, Ms. Veenhuis—"

"Hello, Carla," Brecker said, sauntering onto the dock. "It's been awhile."

"Has it?" she said. "Doesn't seem like it. How are you, Curt? Or should I call you Mr. Brecker now?"

"Curt's fine. What brings you all the way up here?"

"What do you mean what brings me? You do. The *Herald's* going to do a financial section spread on you, interview, pictures, the works."

"Really? I don't recall agreeing to do an interview. And if I did, you'd be the last person I'd talk to. After that hatchet job you did on me for *Newsweek*? Not a chance."

"What the hell is this?" she said slowly. "Mr. Follett said he'd talked to you—"

"Follett? Oh yeah, I do recall a guy named Follett. At the board meeting, when I took over PrinTech."

"You took over—"

"That's right. I picked up the *Herald* and a half dozen other magazines a few weeks ago. On the q.t. of course. And I did talk to Follett. But I never told him I'd do an interview. As I recall, what I said was that I was a big fan of yours, and that I'd be up here for the week and wouldn't

mind having some company."

"You incredibly arrogant son of a bitch," she said evenly. "You went to all this bother over some lousy story—"

"Not at all," Brecker grinned. "I didn't figure Follett'd really send you up here. I was just testing him, to see what kinda manager he is."

"What kind of a pimp, you mean," she snapped, turning to Walsh. "How quick can I get out of here?"

"You can't, ma'am," he said, "not for at least four days, maybe more depending on how heavy this fog comes down."

"Tough break, Carla," Brecker said, "so how about it? Can you take a joke?"

"This 'test' you were giving Follett," Carla said, turning to face Brecker again, "did he pass? Or fail?"

"He flunked," Brecker said. "Rump-kissers make lousy execs."

"And can I tell him that when I get back?"

"I ah—sure, why not?" Brecker said, his weathered face creasing into a wolf's grin. "In fact, I like it."

"Then I guess I can take a joke, Curt. Got anything to drink in this dump?"

"Absolutely," Brecker said. "Get the lady's bags, sonny, and tell Jeeves to set another plate for dinner."

"Don't call me sonny," Walsh said, but neither of them seemed to notice.

He wound up having to cook dinner as well. By the time he'd stacked the supplies in the cooling shed and carried Carla Veenhuis's bags up to the main cabin, she was already merrily established in the poker game. Kimura had given her his seat, out of chivalry or more likely chauvinism, and retired to his bunk to read. The others, MacGowan, Ehmke, and Huddleston, had apparently agreed to lower the stakes to cut her in, a courtesy they'd never offered the guides. Pitka was still sitting in his chair by the stove, lost in a steel and stone reverie, working on the same blade and his third or fourth scotch judging from the glaze in his dark eyes. He'd made no move to begin supper and Walsh knew better than to ask.

Instead, he busied himself at the stove, flipping on the burners, starting a pot of prefab potatoes, building a bowl of tossed salad and condiments, checking out Carla Veenhuis as he worked. A very handsome lady, he decided, a little older than he'd first thought, probably late thirtyish, tall, wide-shouldered, small bust, sandy hair worn boyishly short. And a scar,

a single purplish welt that trailed down from the corner of her mouth. Certainly not — pretty, in a conventional sense, but definitely attractive. And he wasn't the only one who thought so.

Ehmke was all but drooling, potato-nose MacGowan was striving to tone up and launder his language, coming off like Rhett Butler from South Jersey. Huddleston was plunging on every pot, trying to maneuver Carla into a head-to-head confrontation, but she had no trouble finessing him and was already well ahead, Walsh guessed. Only Brecker seemed unaffected, playing his usual low-key game, keeping a record of each hand in a small notepad, even though pots were cash only, no markers, a house rule.

As the propane stove warmed, Walsh had to ignore the game, shaving onions and green pepper onto a griddle filmed with oil and lightly dusted with garlic salt, then stirring in finger-thin strips of dark, fat-free moose steak, letting them sear a moment, the aroma of garlic and smoking steak competing with the reek of Brecker's cigars. He folded the meat and peppers into foot-long seeded buns, hot-dog style, then popped them into a candle-heated steamer, gradually making enough to serve everyone at once. The

warmer was nearly filled when Carla's voice broke his concentration.

"Goddamn," she said, quietly at first, then louder, "Goddamn it, Brecker, you're dealing seconds!"

"Hey, easy, lady," Huddleston began—

"Don't 'lady' me, you jerk! He's cheating and he's not even very good at it."

"Jeez, cut me a little slack, Carla," Brecker sighed. "I'm not so bad. None of them caught it."

"You admit it?" she said, incredulous.

"Sure," Brecker shrugged. "I do it all the time, adds a little spice to the game. I keep track of what everybody loses. If I get caught, I pay 'em back triple. Doesn't happen often. Gentlemen, the lady just made y'all a pile of money, damn her eyes." He flipped through his notepad. "Ernst, by my reckoning I owe you twenty-one thousand three, you can check my figures if you like. Mr. Kimura—"

"No," Billy Pitka said, rising unsteadily from his chair.

"No?" Brecker echoed, watching the guide wobble over to the table, skinning knife in one hand, half a tumbler of scotch in the other. "What's the matter, Pitka, you can't take a joke?"

"It ain't right," Pitka said,

"you can't just—cheat people, then buy 'em off. It ain't right."

"Maybe you'd better ask them what they think—"

"I don't ask them shit, or you neither," Pitka snarled. "This is *my* camp, Mister Bigbucks. You rent it for a week, maybe two, then somebody else does. You don't own it. You don't make the rules. I do."

Brecker bridged his fingertips and stared up at Billy over them, the two of them eye to eye, alone. "You're drunk, Pitka," he said at last, "but that doesn't make you wrong. So what you got in mind? You want me to pay more than triple? Or maybe we play one more hand for—"

Pitka slammed the skinning knife down through the deck of cards as Brecker reached for them, burying the blade in the table a whisker away from Brecker's fingertips. "You're through playin' games in my camp, mister. House rules say no markers. Can you get up the cash?"

"Sure," Brecker snapped. "I always carry an extra thirty, forty grand up to huntin' camps in freakin' Alaska. Don't be an idiot."

"I, ahm, have no objection to taking Mr. Brecker's check," Carla interjected quietly, "do you, Ernst? Mac?"

"None at all," Ehmke swal-

lowed, avoiding Pitka's glower. "No problem," MacGowan said.

"Then I'd say that pretty much resolves things, wouldn't you, Mr. Pitka?" Carla said carefully. "Providing, of course, that Curt apologizes to all concerned."

"Apologizes?" Pitka echoed. "Yeah. I wouldn't mind seein' that myself. How about it, Brecker?"

"Apologize?" Brecker glared at Carla. "All right, fine, if that's all it takes to cool everybody off. Gentlemen, and, ah, Carla, sorry if my little joke wasn't appreciated. I humbly apologize, okay?"

"Accepted," Carla nodded. "Now, can we get on with the game? I feel a streak coming on. You know, Mr. Pitka, I've covered three wars, and beaucoup elections, but I've never seen anybody cut cards any more—thoroughly than you just did. Maybe you'd like to sit in, keep an eye on things?"

"No, thanks, I only play with friends," Billy grunted, jerking his blade out of the table, "but for what it's worth, you handled that pretty good, lady. And if I ain't said so yet, welcome to my camp."

Walsh found the first kill a little after nine the next morning. He left the camp before

dawn riding one of the rough-coated Canadian pack horses, headed north along the Tonzona, then up into the Kuskokwim foothills, carrying only his rifle, binoculars, and enough food for a day. The countryside was dreamlike, draped in a silvery mist that held visibility to fifty or sixty yards at first light, gradually lengthening as the morning wore on. He had no trouble locating the box canyon Pitka had described, but it was larger than he'd expected, an open, wind-scoured arena, mossy earth abrasions showing through its snow skin, ringed by rolling, heavily timbered foothills. A swift finger creek of the Nowatina coursed through the hills at the valley's north end, an area thick with aspen and jackpine, good cover for moose, and grouse. And bear.

He tethered his pony in a copse of cedar a half mile from the canyon mouth, then moved up into the hills on foot, methodically crisscrossing the game trails, shadowing through the timber toward the creek. He found two carcasses in the first hour, a moose calf and a grizzly. He couldn't be sure the moose was a bear kill, though a bear'd obviously fed on it. Still, it could have been pulled down by wolves which were driven off by a griz.

The dead bear was another matter, no question there. It

had been a fair-sized adult griz, eight hundred pounds or more, and the only thing big enough to kill a bear that size was another bear. Even bigger. The kill was weeks old, no sign of recent activity; still Walsh felt his stomach knot and his senses sharpen. The biology courses he'd taken at Washington State had always placed man at the top of the food chain. But not in these hills. There was a timelessness about this place, an atavistic awareness that here technology hadn't decided the competition yet, and the outcome was still in doubt.

It took two more hours of taut, cautious scouting to find a fresh carcass. The killing ground was on a hillside, perhaps forty meters above the valley floor. He thought the area had been lightning struck at first, chunks of aspen bark scattered around, the earth torn up, but then he spotted the garden-sized patch of freshly dug earth, and beside it the bulky silhouette of the half-buried corpse of another bear. The cannibal griz would almost certainly be lying up now, somewhere near the stream to the north. Still, Walsh spent nearly half an hour scoping out the area with his binoculars before moving in to inspect the carcass.

It was a sow grizzly, near record size herself, better than a

thousand pounds. Or had been. She'd been ripped to pieces, her throat torn open, her coat gouged by chainsaw claws that left bone chips embedded in the terrible wounds. Walsh swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry, and scanned the torn earth quickly, uneasy with the torn carcass and the blood-stench of the killing ground. The tracks showed signs of only two bears. The sow had been moving across the hillside, feeding, and the cannibal had stalked her from above, then charged when she'd entered the clearing. The combat must have been horrific, trees broken, the earth torn up, but the worst of it was that there wasn't more damage. Walsh had seen an acre of forest leveled when two male grizzlies fought over territory or over a sow during mating season, but there was no such damage here. This giant bitch had been slaughtered with relative ease. And she was alone, no sign of cubs traveling with her, which meant that she'd been the focus of the attack all along. This was no accidental combat, brought on by a mother defending her cubs. The cannibal griz had seen the huge sow as legitimate prey. Food on the move, nothing more. Hadn't feared her at all. So Pitka's guess was almost certainly correct. The cannibal *must* be a crossbreed, half Kodiak, half grizzly, but far from

the coastal areas where such freaks are usually found. Far enough to be counted as a record griz. If they could find a way to take it. And it might not be so difficult.

There was a wooded hill almost directly across the valley floor from the carcass, perhaps a hundred thirty meters away, which offered a clear view of the area. Even if the cannibal winded them at that range it wouldn't matter. He wouldn't fear them. Or anything else on the planet. They could set up there, and take him when he returned to feed on the sow, which he surely would within the next day or two. A clear shot, a clean kill. As easy as the sow had been for the cannibal and close enough to the valley floor so packing it out wouldn't—Walsh heard a faint rustle in the brush. Something small. Field mouse perhaps. Chasing or being chased. Reminding him that he wasn't the only hunter in these hills. And that a cannibal's killing ground wasn't a good place to be. Time to move on.

In the four years he'd been working as a guide, Walsh had killed more than a dozen bears, none as large as this griz, perhaps, but some damned great beasts. Still, as he backtracked through the mist away from the clearing, he felt—a nudge. A sense of. . . Darkness. Nearby.

And he had to force himself to keep his pace down to a brisk walk. It would have been very easy to run.

“You’re bettin’ ten grand this is a record bear, you know,” Brecker said. “No record, no money, and I’ve only got one license.”

“I know,” Walsh said, “I’ll take my chances. It’ll make B&C.”

“Why? Just because it killed another bear? That doesn’t make it bigger, necessarily. Jack Dempsey made a career outta beatin’ people bigger’n he was.”

“Dempsey never fought any thousand pound grizzlies,” Walsh said. “Look, if you don’t want the bear, maybe Ehmke—”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want it. I just want to make damn sure I’m not gonna freeze my tail off out there for nothin’.”

“I don’t understand what the fuss is about getting your name in the book anyway,” Carla said. “Why not just buy the company and print your own?”

Walsh had arrived at the camp around two and found Brecker and the woman alone. Pitka’d taken the others out for a grouse shoot, and even MacGowan, the non-shooter, had gone along. A bit suspicious, that, Walsh thought. Especially since Brecker was wearing a new bandage on the

back of his hand, and Carla was pointedly keeping her distance from him.

"Couple of reasons," Brecker said. "For openers, I've killed a fair number of animals in rough country, seems like I oughta have somethin' to show for it besides some stuffed heads anybody could buy at a garage sale. And for another, I'm in the intimidation business. When I'm lookin' to take over a company, and the board's diggin' up all the dirt they can, this could be a good thing for 'em to find out."

"Then how about pictures?" she said.

"Sure, darlin', why not? If we take the bear, I can pose on him like Tarzan—"

"No, I mean real pictures. Action shots. Close up and personal. Taken by a pro."

"Hey, wait a minute," Walsh said.

"Of me killing the bear, you mean?" Brecker said.

"Exactly, you could blow them up, hang them in your office. Talk about intimidation. . . ."

"No way," Walsh said, "it's too dangerous."

"More dangerous than Nicaragua?" Carla asked, touching the scar on her jaw. "Or Afghanistan?"

"I'm not taking a woman along," Walsh said, "not this time. This bear—"

"Actually, I don't remember askin' your permission," Brecker

said mildly. "It's my hunt, I'm payin' for it, right?"

"Dammit, this isn't just an ordinary bear! It's a cannibal!"

"I grew up on a ranch in Rhodesia," Carla said, "I'm used to dangerous animals. But if it would make you feel better, I can carry a rifle, or better yet, use a telephoto lens, from, say, a hundred meters behind you? Surely that would be safe enough?"

"I think so," Brecker said, "and if you don't, Walsh, I think maybe your boss'd be willin' to take us. 'Course I'm not sure he'd split the money with you. . . ."

"All right, fine," Walsh said, "she can go, but by God you'll stay where I put you, understood?"

"Absolutely," Carla smiled, "anything you say, Mr. Walsh."

They set out at four thirty A.M., a full three hours before first light, with Walsh riding point, leading a pack pony loaded with a day's provisions, Carla's camera bag, and the collapsible travois for hauling out the kill. Carla followed, shapeless as a potato sack in her heavy clothing, with Brecker bringing up the rear, dozing in the saddle. The poker game was still alive when Walsh got up at three, and Brecker was playing, seeming none the worse for lack of

sleep. He'd even helped Walsh saddle the horses.

The ride out was surreal, the three of them ghosting along in the mist, no lights, no conversation. Walsh had no trouble keeping to the trail along the Tonzona, but after they left the river behind, he had to rely on the reflective markers he'd dropped the day before, solitary eyes glowing ahead of them in the dark.

He placed Carla and the horses in a copse of jackpine overlooking the canyon, after extracting her word of honor that she'd stay up there and move around no more than necessary to get her pictures. Then the two men stalked quietly to the hummock across the valley from the killing ground. Walsh strung a piece of camouflage netting to shield them from the bear's view, and they settled in. Brecker rolled over on his back, laid his rifle aside, and was snoring in less than a minute.

It was well after seven before Walsh could see well enough to spot the sow's carcass, and the cannibal was already near it, scouting the area, a shadow, a presence Walsh sensed as much as saw through the haze. He nudged Brecker with his elbow. Hard. Brecker groaned, then rolled over, resting his weight on his elbows. Walsh passed him the binoculars and the older

man scanned the far side of the canyon.

"That's him, isn't it?" Brecker said. "Just below that little stand of pines."

"That's him," Walsh nodded, surprised Brecker had spotted the bear so easily.

"You get a good look at him yet?"

"No. Still too misty. Might not even be our bear, another one could've found the kill."

"I don't think so," Brecker said, passing the binoculars back. "I think that's him. Wake me up when you can see better."

"You're going back to sleep?"

"I had a long night," Brecker said.

"Jesus," Walsh said, "seems to me that if you travel five thousand miles to hunt..." But Brecker had already cradled his head in the crook of his elbow and nodded off again. Or pretended to. The worst of it was that Walsh knew he was right. He glassed the killing ground again. Nothing. Shadows in the haze. He rolled over on his back, scanned the hillside behind them, saw a flicker of movement as Carla waved, just once. She wasn't where he'd left her, but close enough. She'd placed her camera on a tripod near the pines in thick cover, but with an excellent view of the valley floor. He waved, but she didn't answer.

And when he rolled back over he realized why. The cannibal was in the open.

No more than a presence at first, a hulking silhouette shrouded by mist, the great bear lumbered out of the timber toward his kill. Like man, the grizzly walks flat-footed, his entire clawed pad upon the ground, moving with a lazy, loose-joined gait that looks clumsy, ungainly. But every step of the cannibal's shambling swagger denoted raw power, strength that could kill an elk with a blow, or tear open a smaller bear like rotten fruit.

In the clearing, clearly visible now, the cannibal pawed at the carcass of the sow, then grunted and heaved it out of its bloody grave, shifting the thousand pound carcass effortlessly with a single paw.

"Jesus H. Christ," Walsh said softly.

"You see him?" Brecker said, without opening his eyes.

"He's a silvertip. A monster. Damn near as big as a Kodiak. I've never seen a griz this big."

"Boone and Crockett, do you think?"

"You bastard!" Walsh snapped, slamming Brecker's shoulder with the binoculars. "Who cares about that? Look at him, goddamn it!"

Brecker raised his head, eyed Walsh coolly, then took the bi-

noculars. "My, my," he said after a moment, "he is one big mother, isn't he?"

"Look at his claws," Walsh said, "how long. They should be short this time of year, worn down from digging up roots and grubs, but they're not. I don't think this guy works for anything. He just hunts."

"Helluva manicure," Brecker conceded, "and you didn't answer my question."

"You're telling me you can look at that bear, and all you can think about is a friggin' book?"

"No, that's not all I think about," Brecker snapped, "but that's why we're both out here, ain't it? You gotta learn to prioritize, college boy. I've heard Pitka call you that. You really been to college?"

"That's right."

"To study what?"

"Natural sciences mostly. What difference does it make?"

"Not much, I guess, bein's all you do is blunder around in the brush workin' for an Indian probably can't spell his name."

"What I do is my business."

"Yeah, well maybe it might be if you stayed outta my face," Brecker said. "You don't think much of me, do ya?"

"As little as possible."

Brecker grinned. "You're pretty good with words, college boy, not so hot at life."

"What the hell do you know about life? You buy it and sell it, or kill it. But you're right about one thing, I don't think much of you, Brecker. I think you're an asshole. That straight enough?"

"Yeah. Too bad you can't back it up."

"I'll back it up any time you like."

"You betcha, just you and me behind a barn someplace, right? Or maybe in a boxin' ring, with gloves on and a referee? Jesus, Walsh, grow up. If you're really gonna tangle with somebody, you gotta mean it if you wanna come out on top. Life's a joke, and there ain't no rules to a joke, or didn't nobody mention that in college? You mess with me and I'll eat you for lunch."

"Odd choice of phrase, that, considering. Or maybe not. You are kind of a cannibal, Brecker, you and that bear over there, both living off your own kind. You think you're a big shot, that you can buy anything. Well, you don't own me."

"Don't I? So why you out here? Pleasure of my company? You're workin' a peon job for peon money, takin' guff from guys you don't like, and you wanna lecture me about life? Gimme a break, Walsh, you ain't got a handle on anything. And I ain't kin to that bear, you are."

"Me?"

"Damn right. Hidin' out up here in the back of noplace, thinking you're better and smarter than the rest. Big frog in a little pond. Until a bigger frog comes along."

"Maybe there's some truth in what you say," Walsh said evenly, "about me. But not about him. That bear's not hiding from anything. He's king here."

"You mean he was," Brecker said, picking up his rifle, and getting to his feet. "Until today."

"What do you think you're doing?"

"What I came here for. I'm gonna take that bear. You comin'?"

"You can't go down there. He'll spot you the minute you move."

"I figure he's big enough he won't spook. He'll guard his kill. Or fight for it. Either way I'll get a shot, which is more'n I'll get sittin' up here jawin' at you." He brushed the camouflage netting aside and started down the hill.

"Dammit, Brecker, come back here," Walsh shouted.

"Hey, kid, if you can't take a joke, shut up. You spook the bear and Carla won't get her pictures."

Walsh glanced back up the hill involuntarily, then groaned, grabbed his rifle and trotted

after Brecker, who was already halfway down the hill.

"That's what this is about, the damned pictures, isn't it?" Walsh said, overtaking Brecker as he reached the valley floor.

"Some," Brecker admitted, keeping his pace to a steady walk, "but mostly it's about—style. If this is my last bear, I should do it right. *Mano a mano*; the Messicans call it, man to man."

"That means hand to hand," Walsh corrected.

"Whatever," Brecker grinned, "but I think my friend over there's gettin' the idea." Across the valley, on the killing ground, the cannibal moved away from the sow's carcass, swiveling his massive head, squinting toward them through the mist. A single cough issued like a musket shot from low in its throat, clearly as a spoken word. *Stop*.

"And good mornin' to you, Mr. Cannibal," Brecker called back, "sorry to interrupt your breakfast." They were well into the field now, less than a hundred meters from the bear. The grizzly began a low rumble, like distant thunder, that built slowly in its massive frame, echoing from the hills as though the earth itself was shuddering a warning. And then the bear rose, up on his haunches, growling, his coarse, dew-rimmed coat gleaming like chain mail

in the mountain haze. It raised its sabered paws, shadowboxing with the air, waving them off. Brecker slowed, then halted.

"I'll be goddamned," he said softly. "I been to Red China an' the Alpena County Fair, but I never seen anything like this."

"Take him," Walsh said urgently, "do it now, while he's up." Brecker didn't answer. He and the cannibal eyed each other silently across the snow-patched valley floor. "Take him," Walsh repeated, "or damn it, I will! When he comes down he'll charge, forty miles an hour. Do it!" From somewhere behind them Walsh heard a call, almost a wail. Carla Brecker glanced back at the sound, doffed his cap, then threw it aside.

"For God's sake!" Walsh said.

"Gettin' a little antsy, college boy?" Brecker grinned, turning back to the bear. A gust of wind whipped across the valley floor, spinning Brecker's hat away, tousling his silvered hair. "God, that sumbitch is somethin', ain't he?" Brecker said. "Seems a shame. . . ." He brought his rifle to his shoulder, concentrated for a long moment, then squeezed off. A pop, almost lost in the roar of the bear, but it was a perfect hit. Dust and fur exploded from the bear's chest, dead center.

"HEEEAAAUGGHHH!!!"

The grizzly dropped to all fours,

charging headlong down the hillside, flattening trees, underbrush like a living avalanche, screaming as it came. Brecker coolly dropped to one knee and fired again, and again dust flew from the bear's shoulder, a good hit but still no effect, and now the bear was on the canyon floor, wheeling at full speed, howling toward them like a train. Brecker fired and so did Walsh, but it was like the worst nightmare he'd ever had, the bullets striking or falling short, useless. Walsh fired again and his second shot kicked dirt, not even reaching the bear, and he felt his rifle slipping from his numbed fingers, and then he was running, back, toward the hill and the horses, hearing the pop of Brecker's last two shots drowned in the bellow of the cannibal.

Legs pumping, blood roaring in his head, Walsh plunged into the brush, scrambling up the hummock, vaulting the camouflage netting, tangling his ankle, going down, rolling, scrabbling along on all fours like an animal, then up again, running, breath searing his throat.

And then he was over the crest and into the trees, and Carla was there, and something, some shred of himself returned, and he slowed his flight to a reeling walk, and then

stopped, head down, hands locked to his knees, sobbing for breath. He heard a soft click from behind him, and then another. And realized that Carla was still shooting pictures, the camera shutter flicking with a steady, mechanical pulse.

Walsh straightened, and stalked slowly over, fists clenched, seeing the woman and her damned camera through a bloody tunnel. Until he realized that she was blind, her eyes closed, tears streaming, her thumb automatically flicking the controller of a camera that had long since run out of film.

They walked slowly into the valley, clustered in a semicircle with Pitka in the lead, Walsh, Huddleston, Kimura, Ehmke, Carla Veenhuis, all of them armed, wary, weapons ready, chest high. MacGowan, the non-hunter, had been left behind at the canyon mouth with the horses.

They found Brecker's body, or most of it, near the center of the canyon only a few yards from where he'd fought the bear. Pitka knelt beside the body and brushed some of the soil from Brecker's face. The cannibal had covered the body with dirt, to preserve it. For later. Billy's lips pursed, but his face showed nothing. "Get him on the tra-

vois," he said to Walsh, who'd carried the collapsed aluminum frame on his backpack. "I'm gonna backtrack the bear, see where he went, the resta you stay put, keep your eyes open."

Walsh had the body loaded, wrapped in a tarp, when Pitka came back from the original killing ground. The others had moved away from Walsh and the corpse, forming a tribal ring against the evening shadows slithering out from the canyon walls.

"You said the first shot took him in the chest?" Pitka asked, kneeling beside Walsh as he tied down the last corner of the tarp.

"It was a good hit," Walsh nodded, "should've dropped him."

"Couldn'a been that good," Pitka said, "ain't hardly no bloodsign up there. No bone chips. Some fur, a few spots, that's it. Tracks don't show him limpin' none, neither. I don't think he's hurt bad."

"The, ah," Walsh swallowed. "The rounds didn't seem to affect him at all. It was like a dream, like our ammo was faulty. Or he was bulletproof. We were hitting him but. . . . Nothing. He kept coming."

Ehmke stepped out of the ring a few paces, slung his weapon from his shoulder strap, and picked up the rifle Walsh

had dropped that morning. He racked a round into the chamber, and fired. The roar and the recoil almost tore the weapon from his grasp. Pitka wheeled and was on him in two quick steps, backhanding the German across the face with his gloved fist. Ehmke stumbled and went down, hard, with Pitka glowering over him.

"Why don't you just ring a goddamn dinner bell," Pitka sparled, "maybe get the rest of us killed, too."

"There's nothink wrong with that rifle," Ehmke said. "You heard it."

"I don't give a shit about that," Pitka said. "All I know is the two best shots in this bunch tangled with that bear without makin' a dent in it, and I wanna be the hell away from here before it comes back, you dig? Now get up off your ass and give Walsh a hand with that carcass."

"It's a body," Ehmke said stiffly, getting warily to his feet. "When a man dies it's a body, not a carcass."

"Is it?" Pitka asked.

The rough coated ponies shuffling through the snow, the clank of the travois frame scraping stone, were the only sounds on the trek back. From the riders, not a word, to anyone. No one

rode near Walsh, or looked at him, nor he them. He stayed at the rear of the column, where trouble would most likely come, half hoping it would, but still shaken from the horror of the morning.

At camp, for lack of a better place, Pitka and Walsh put Brecker's body in the cooler, with the head of Ehmke's moose. The others watched a few moments, then left them to it. Only Carla waited outside the entryway until it was done, her face ghostly in the twilight, the scar on her jaw glowing like a fresh wound. And then she turned away, and Walsh followed Pitka down to the stable.

The two of them worked in silence, unsaddling the mounts, brushing them down, clearing the animals' hooves of ice lumps that could cause bruising.

"Billy," Walsh said at last, "do you believe me?"

"About what?" Pitka was leaning against one of the ponies, cradling its hoof on his knee, scraping its shoe with a hoofpick.

"What I said about the — ammo. Being weak I mean."

"I've had that feeling a few times—"

"I'm not talking about a *feeling*, dammit. I'm telling you the bullets had no effect on that bear."

"So maybe you didn't hit it as

good as you thought."

"It was more than that. My second round didn't even reach him. I had him centered in my sights, but the slug kicked dirt maybe two feet in front of him. And it didn't sound right, or feel right either, barely any recoil."

"It sounded okay when Ehmke fired it off," Pitka said, dropping the pony's hoof, pushing the animal into its stall.

"I know. I can't explain that. But you know I've killed bears before, and you know I'm — honest, I think. And I swear to you it didn't sound like that this morning."

"Yeah, well, the thing is, I *don't* really know you, kid. You ain't bad for a white boy, you work hard, don't gimme no lip, but it ain't like we grew up in the same house, is it? I can't say I know what you do when a grizzer's comin' down your throat. Hell, I ain't even sure what *I'd* do. And what I believe ain't got anything to do with it. My mother's people, the Cree, they believe we're brothers to the bear. Call 'em The Ol' Man Wearin' Fur, or the Chief's Son. They believe they're special, maybe sacred. But I've seen grizzlies rootin' like pigs in the garbage dump outside Aniak while friggin' tourists take pitchers, don't look too sacred to me. Garbage for the Chief's Son. Hell, I spent a year in Viet-

nam, kid. Don't ask me what I believe."

"Well, I am asking."

"Look, it's been a long day, Walsh, so let's quit jerkin' around, okay? What are you sayin'? That the bear's bullet-proof, that he's magic? What?"

"All I'm saying is that our ammunition didn't work."

"And you figure that's the bear's fault?"

"No, but the ammo could have been—tampered with. The guns are all racked in the entryway, and the reloading equipment's there too. Somebody could have palmed a bullet puller and our clips on the way to the john, dumped some of the powder out of each cartridge, then reset the slugs."

"Jesus Christ," Pitka snorted, heaving a saddle off another mount. "You're tellin' me Brecker fired off all five rounds and never realized they was bad?"

"He was an experienced hunter, but he was still just a weekender. With the bear coming at us, he probably wouldn't have noticed if his damn gun was whistling Dixie and you know it. Dammit, I'm telling you somebody messed with our ammo."

"Okay, okay, maybe they could have. So why would they?"

"I don't know. Brecker wasn't an easy guy to like. Maybe

somebody wanted to do him in."

"Like who?"

"It occurred to me," Walsh said carefully, "that maybe it was you."

"Me? Let me get this straight. You figure maybe I sent you and Brecker out there to get kilt by that cannibal, but you're askin' me if I know *you*? You stupid bastard."

"Look, I understand it must be hard to take crap from guys like Brecker all your life—"

"You don't understand shit about me, Walsh. I didn't give a damn about Brecker one way or the other, or the rest of 'em neither. It's just a job to me, pays better'n anything else I can do. Takin' crap comes with the territory and I generally give as good as I get. But you asked me what I believe, so lemme give you some advice. The cops are gonna look into this, and they're gonna be on your side, up to a point. Brecker damn near killed himself, walkin' out into the valley like that. So you ran, so what? Anybody with a lick o' sense would've. So just own up to what happened like a man, and they'll probly go easy on ya. They're damn sure gonna jerk your license, but maybe they'll pass on tryin' to nail you for manslaughter for losin' a client, and they can, you know. Whatever happens out there, we're

responsible under the law. But forget this crap about somebody screwin' up your ammo. It makes you look like a punk."

"But dammit, it's the truth."

"Or maybe you want to think it is. On the other hand, if it was me that jimmied up your rounds, I guess I'd tell you to forget about it, wouldn't I? Nuts." Pitka spat a brown stream into the horse's water tank. "I'm goin' up, get some dinner on, and then I think I'll get drunk. You care to join me?"

"I'm not going up there," Walsh said. "I know what they think. I know what you think."

"You wanna sleep out here, that's up to you. You'll probably be warm enough. You want me to bring some food down?"

"Just get out of here and leave me alone, okay? Go on."

"Sure," Pitka shrugged, "whatever you say. Hey, Walsh?" Pitka paused in the stable doorway, his face a mask in the shadows. "How many rounds you fire this morning? Two, you said, right?"

"I guess."

"But the one Ehmke fired was okay. Proves I never messed with your ammo. I'da made damn sure I fixed 'em all, white boy. Sleep warm now, hear?"

There was a knock at the stable door. Walsh ignored it, pulled the throat of his sleeping bag a lit-

tle higher, snuggled farther down in the hay pile beside the stalls. He didn't want to wake up, didn't want to face anyone. The knock came again. Damn. Half awake, he rolled out of his bag and stumbled to the door in the dim glow of the Coleman lantern. He opened the door, and Brecker was standing there, his face horribly torn, his body wounded, mangled. But alive. And with the same familiar grin.

"What's the matter, kid," Brecker said, holding out a bloodied hand, "can't you take a joke?"

"NOOOOO!" Walsh screamed, lashing out with his fist, slamming it into the wall as he tried to push Brecker away. Lightning flashed up his elbow, bringing him instantly awake. "God, I'm sorry, Curt, I'm sorry!" he panted, sweat streaming down his face, staring wildly about him, trying to get his bearings. The stable. He was in the stable. "God," he repeated, more quietly. He swallowed, hard, and took a deep, ragged breath, trying to pull himself together, to slow his thundering heart.

There was a knock at the stable door.

"No!" Walsh bolted to his feet, backing against the wall, but there was no other way out. And after a moment he realized it wasn't a knock at the door

anyway. It was just the horses, shuffling in their stalls, shoes tamping the frozen earth. "Sweet Jesus, take it easy," he said softly, half to them, half to himself. "Easy. Settle down." But they didn't. They continued stamping, shifting nervously from side to side, leaning against the gates, trying to back out. And then Walsh heard it too. Someone *was* at the stable door, or just outside it, moving around.

Brecker? No. No way. Brecker was dead. He glanced at his watch. Nearly seven. Probably just somebody heading for the crapper. Still. He had to know. Crossing the stable and opening the door was perhaps the hardest thing Walsh had ever done. Because he knew, he *knew*, deep in his belly, that Brecker would be there, waiting. But somehow he did walk slowly to the door, and opened it.

But it wasn't Brecker. It was the cannibal.

The great bear was a monstrous shadow in the pre-dawn haze, a dark mountain snuffling at the meat cooler, rooting at its base, great paws brushing fitfully at its walls. Brecker. They'd taken the grizzly's kill, and he'd come after it. As Walsh's eyes adjusted to the dimness, he could see the cannibal's wounds, blood matted in the fur of its shoulder, a gouge on its skull where the hide had been torn away. And yet its

movements seemed normal, and it had apparently followed them without trouble. They hadn't hurt it at all. And now it was here, and Walsh had no weapon, nothing in the barn but a hayfork. He was forty yards from the cabin, and the bear would charge anything that moved. Anything.

Sweating, hands trembling, Walsh peered through the crack of the door trying to come up with a plan. Maybe if the bear got into the meat cooler he'd—God. He didn't even want to think about that. Or perhaps if he turned one of the horses out it would distract the bear long enough to—but then a light went on in the cabin, and a moment later in the entryway. Someone was coming out. And the grizzly whuffed, turning toward the sound.

And suddenly Walsh was running, sprinting silently across the clearing toward the entryway, slamming headlong into Ehmke as he opened the door, the two of them going down in a tangle.

"HHEEEAAAUUGGHH!!"

The grizzly howled and charged, slamming into the building in a frenzy, smashing down the door. The flimsy outbuilding collapsed, trapping Walsh and Ehmke in the wreckage, the great bear ripping and slashing at the debris trying to get at them. A gun. For godssake where

were the guns? Walsh clawed desperately around him, tearing his flesh on the shattered wood, the bear's unearthly howling drowning every thought, every prayer. He felt his fingers close on the cold steel of a gun barrel, and he pulled the weapon to him through the shambles. Ehmke's rifle. Cartridges in its sling. He fumbled one shell into the magazine, slammed the bolt home, and turned and fired into the howling maelstrom towering over him. And took a tremendous blow from the bear's paw that nearly ripped his head from his shoulders. But the shot had done some damage. The cannibal was backing away, clawing and biting at the wound in its chest.

Swaying, barely clinging to consciousness, Walsh managed to load another round and fire. And the bear flinched, and went down, then forced itself up again, shambling unsteadily toward the treeline. Walsh loaded his last cartridge and stumbled out of the wreckage on wooden legs. And the cannibal sensed his coming, and turned, and staggered upright, the Chief's Son, thundering like a giant, life-blood streaming, claws unsheathed, reaching— Walsh thrust the muzzle of the rifle into the face of the darkness and fired, and a hammerblow shattered the light, spinning

him down and down, to where Brecker waited, smiling, in a land of eternal ice.

Ice. Endless ice shifting in a gunmetal gray sea, the floes heaving, subsiding. A car horn sounded in the distance, and the ice began to shimmer. He tried to hold the image in his mind, but it was breaking up now, fading. He opened his eyes slowly, and Brecker was there, his face only inches away, scarred from the griz—no. Brecker didn't have a scar.

"Welcome back," Carla Veen-huis said softly. She was slouched in a chair beside his bed. A hospital bed. Her eyes were bruised, sleepless, but seeing her there made him forget the ice, and sanctuary. Her hand was holding his, or rather holding his bandages. Both of his hands were bandaged.

"How do you feel?" Carla asked.

Walsh tried to speak, gagged. Carla held a plastic cup of water to his lips, and he drank deep. "Thank you," he said as she returned the cup to his nightstand. "I feel terrible."

"I'm not surprised. You look like you've been hit by a train. Or a bear."

"I imagine so. What, ah, what time is it?"

"A little after seven."

"A.M. or P.M.?"

"In the morning."

"You've been here all night?"

"I—yes. They let me stay. My plane's leaving today. And I wanted to see you. To say good-bye."

"I—see. How's Ehmke?"

"Alive. In better shape than you are. And very, very grateful, which is one of the reasons I'm here. As a spokesperson, for the others. I'm supposed to offer a group apology for the way we—behaved toward you after Curt was killed."

"Nobody owes me anything."

"You're wrong. You risked your life to save Ehmke, but it could have been any of us coming out that door, and we're well aware of it. And we've decided to do something for you in return."

"Like what?"

"Pitka says you'll lose your guide's license if the authorities find out what—happened the morning Curt was killed. So we've decided it *didn't* happen."

"I don't understand."

"Simple. We've all agreed to tell the police that Curt walked out into that valley alone, that he, in effect, killed himself by his own behavior. That you were never there."

Walsh stared at her a moment, then his eyes swam, and he looked away. "I wish to God that was true."

"It can be. I can alter the photographs to delete your image,

and if we all agree—"

"No, I mean, I wish that's why you were doing it. Out of gratitude. But it's not."

"Isn't it?"

"No. You're doing it to cover yourself, to make sure I don't talk to the police about the ammunition being—altered. I've, ah, been thinking about it. A lot. It was you, wasn't it? The others were all involved financially with Brecker, with too much to lose. Even Pitka, in his way. It had to be you."

"Still clinging to your weak ammo theory, are you? But Ehmke fired your weapon. We all heard it. There was nothing wrong with it."

"True enough. And that's what I'll have to live with. That if I'd fired one more round, Brecker might still be alive. Because you never meant for anyone to get hurt, did you? It was supposed to be a joke, a payback. Curt blazing away, firing rounds that would only annoy the bear and make it charge, and then I was supposed to kill it, but not too quickly. I had two dud rounds, just enough to get the grizzly into the open, to get its picture taken. A picture of me, the punk kid, killing the record book bear instead of Brecker. And the hell of it is, it probably would have worked out that way. If we'd stayed on the hill. If Brecker hadn't—gone

to meet it. God . . . ”

“Why did he do that?” Carla asked, leaning forward, her eyes searching his face. “He was an experienced hunter. It was so—stupid.”

“I don’t know why,” Walsh said. “We were arguing. Maybe he was trying to prove something to me, or to you, but I don’t think so. I think he did it for himself.”

“As he did most things,” she nodded, “for himself. I tried to warn you, you know. I called out.”

“We heard you. For what it’s worth, I think Brecker knows you didn’t mean things to turn out so—badly.”

“And why would you think that?”

“He told me,” Walsh said simply, “he told me it was a joke.”

“Did he indeed?” Carla said, smiling faintly.

“Think what you like. It’s the truth.”

“Perhaps so,” she said, “but it doesn’t really change anything. We’ll both be much better off if you go along with our story. That you weren’t there.”

“I wish I could,” Walsh said, “but no. It’s not true.”

“You’re so young,” Carla said, leaning back, eyeing him coolly, “so—naive. You think truth is like steel, solid, sharp. Take it from an old newsperson, Walsh, it’s not. The truth is smoke,

with no more substance than a cloud castle. I’ll tell you what’s true. Brecker is dead, and you can’t change that. And if you tell people your story, you’ll destroy yourself. For nothing. Because I have what people believe is true. Pictures. Clear, terrible photographs, of you running up the hill toward the camera, leaving Curt to die. Because your ammunition was faulty? No one will believe that. They will only believe what they see. Curt was a famous man, Walsh, the photos of his death will make every newspaper in the country. Your parents will see them, and your friends. Is that what you want?”

“You bitch,” Walsh said.

“No, just a working girl in a man’s world,” Carla sighed, “and I’m very good at my job. I can alter the pictures so you don’t appear, no one will know you were there. So. What’s it to be? I want to hear you say it.”

“My God,” Walsh said, his voice barely a whisper, “all right, you win. Take me out of the damned pictures. Now get out and leave me alone.”

“As you wish,” Carla said, rising, “but you shouldn’t take it too hard, Walsh; you’re going to be a famous man in your—limited circles. You saved Ehmke’s life and killed a giant bear, a record, I’m told. Clients will be falling all over themselves to hire you. You can

probably start your own company."

"No," he said, "I'm through with hunting. Never again."

"I'm sure you think so now, but another season will come. And another after that. You'll put this behind you."

"No," he said, "not a chance in hell."

"Oh, one other thing," Carla said, hesitating in the doorway, "the cannibal bear? It was a—sow, is that the word? A female."

"Was it?" Walsh said. "Well. Somehow I'm not surprised."

"No, perhaps not. But I think Curt would have found it most amusing to have met his end because of a female. Or two. Whatever you thought of him, the man did have a sense of humor."

"Yes," Walsh said softly, "I

guess he did. He . . . told me life is a joke. And jokes have no rules."

"A convenient philosophy. For Curt. But maybe he's right. And you, Mr. Walsh? Can you take a joke?"

"Please, just go away, Carla. I'm very tired."

"Of course," she nodded, "I'm sorry. About everything. I truly am. Goodbye, Mr. Walsh. Good luck to you."

She closed the door softly behind her, and he listened to the click of her heels echoing down the hallway, until they grayed away, and became the tapping at the stable door. Then even that faded.

"And you, Mr. Walsh? Can you take a joke?"

"I don't know," he whispered to the empty room. "Maybe. Maybe I can."

UNSOLVED

by
Lawrence Treat

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the December issue.

The day after Georgio Erysipelas lost fifteen dollars and eight cents to Hans Liverwurst in their weekly poker game, Georgio entered Hans's High Class Delicatessen. Both men were known to be short tempered and had previously come close to fighting over poker hands, but this time the fight was to the death, as Hans's body attests.

All that Detective Sharpeye could learn from witnesses who had heard the argument leading to the tragedy was that Georgio had shouted out in English, "That's all you'll get!" Hans had responded angrily in German, whereupon Georgio had switched into high gear, but in Greek.

Can you guess what they accused each other of?



QUESTIONS

1. Was Hans apparently eating when Georgio came into the store?
Yes _____ No _____
2. Whose footprints are shown? Hans's _____
Georgio's _____
3. Did Hans stop at the pickle barrel? Yes _____
No _____
4. Do you think Hans offered Georgio a pickle? Yes _____
No _____
5. Do you think Hans and Georgio were on friendly terms when
Georgio entered the store? Yes _____ No _____
6. Did Hans return to his table at any time after leaving it?
Yes _____ No _____
7. Do you think that Georgio came to pay his debt?
Yes _____ No _____
8. Do you think that Georgio came to the store with malice afore-
thought? Yes _____ No _____
9. Is there any evidence to show that Georgio may have acted in
self-defense? Yes _____ No _____
10. Where did the murder weapon come from? _____
11. Do you think Hans objected to the fact that the five dollar bill
was torn? Yes _____ No _____
12. What do you think the argument was about: The 8¢ _____
The pickles _____ The \$10.00 _____

See page 151 for the solution to the October puzzle.

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FICTION

Ainsley

—by—
**Esther
J. Holt**

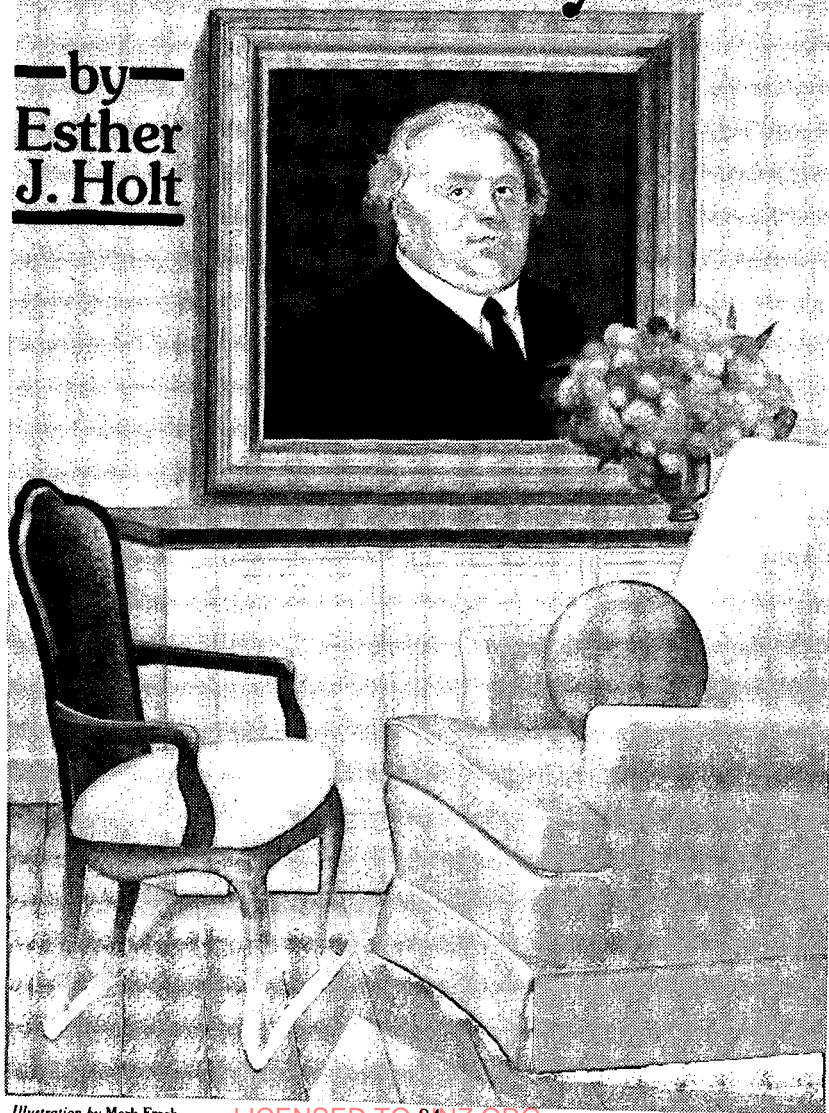


Illustration by Mark Fresh

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Times, she wanders through the house saying his name aloud, keeping it alive, so the old walls won't forget him. He took an old house and made new walls or repaired the old ones. His handprints, living things, are everywhere. On the bare boards, the wallpaper covering them. Layers and layers of handprints.

Jeffrey, they want me to sell the house. The kids. There's too much for me to do. Too much lawn. You made too much lawn, Jeffrey. Jeffrey. And not enough insurance and company pension for me to pay someone every week.

She has let the hayfield surrounding the lawn on three sides grow in, not much, just around three feet. She wore out the old lawn mower. The new one takes her along at a handy clip, in more ways than one.

They told me I wasn't running it right. They all looked at it, all the men in the family, and then stood around shaking their heads. "Ma has to be doing something wrong." I called in a professional. I know they cost money, but they're all I have. The boys are so busy. The carburetor was shot. I tried to tell them that. No one mentions the lawn mower these days.

She thinks about getting a job but wonders where she would apply. Offices, these days, have machines that are beyond her imagination. Maybe she should try the supermarkets, in the deli department. Times were when she baked eight to a dozen pies in one day, two pies to each variety of filling. Or a bushel of filled cookies.

Ainsley wants me to come there for a visit, Jeffrey. To her place in Chicago. I don't know. There are so many stories. And she works and sleeps different times than I do. If she wanted to sleep all day, what would I do?

She sits in his chair, leaning her head back where his shoulders fit. Jeffrey. She pulls the afghan up, clutching it against her chest. He fell asleep here so often, always forgetting to cover up first. The treatments left him feeling so cold, too. She'd stop whatever she was doing and go cover him. She always amazed him with her little kindnesses.

She knows there have been discussions on What To Do About Mama.

"Do you know, I had a few minutes to spare one afternoon and I ran in to see her. Before she knew I was in the house, I heard her saying Daddy Slaughter's name. She just walks around saying his name."

"Did you ask her about it?"

"Of course not. It's her business if she wants to talk to him."

"Well, I think we should keep an eye on her. If any of us sees any sign of anything, carelessness about herself. Not keeping the house up as well as she should."

"Why should she try? She's worked hard for over forty years. Let her rest."

"You're only a son-in-law. You don't understand."

"I do too! I have parents too, you know."

"Your mother has always worked in an office. She's had to keep on her toes."

"Mama stayed home all the time. Except for when she worked before she had us. She hasn't done anything since."

Jeffrey.

She turns on the television to watch her soaps. Then she sits in Jeffrey's chair to work on her umpteenth needlepoint picture. How can they say she hasn't done anything with her life? Every house, every child's room has a needlepoint picture on the wall, all different, all original. How many dresses and shirts has she sewn? How many pairs of curtains?

This picture is for her granddaughter, a wedding gift. New babies to make cookies for. Maybe not. Young people. It doesn't matter. We are known by our own deeds, not by the number of our descendants.

She doesn't actually watch the soaps, she has to look at her work, but it doesn't matter. She grew up with radio. When television came along, she had fun fitting faces to familiar voices.

Jeffrey, we couldn't afford our first television, but you always had to live high and hard.

The telephone rings. She doesn't bother with the cordless phone the kids gave her. She can still walk to the desk by the window.

It's Ainsley, who doesn't say, "Mama, if you used that portable phone we got you, you could answer the phone quicker."

Quicker than what? If they can take the time out to call her, they can just wait a few rings. They want her to keep moving, yet they give her that thing so she can sit still.

"Mama, can I come home for a few days without letting the others know?" She sounds troubled. The one who said, "Mama, if Daddy hadn't given me such a strange name, I wouldn't feel so driven to do something with it." Ainsley, who ran off to Chicago the day she graduated from college.

"And what do I do with you when one of them drops by? They do visit me. I'm not one of the forgotten elderly." Her children have not always been friends. There is none of that "us against the world" feeling.

"I didn't mean to keep me a secret forever, just that I'm coming." Ainsley laughs, then becomes serious. "Can I, Mama? Can you use the company? You can hardly hear my word processor. And I don't expect you to cook for me."

She's coming home to work. Not for a visit, but to work. What's wrong with her Chicago apartment all of a sudden? All her literary friends?

Jeffrey, what will we do here together? What will we talk about?
Jeffrey.

"All my children are welcome to come for a visit. You know that. When can I expect you?"

"Friday, I think. Don't fuss. I'll just dust up my old room." The room she'd shared with Janice. The fights they'd had over territorial rights.

Mama, why did you name me Ainsley instead of something ordinary like Janice or Cathy?

Your daddy called you Ainsley. Ask him.

Jeffrey always could keep a secret, Ainsley still doesn't know. The question may come up again on this visit. This time she will tell, but only Ainsley. Not the other children. It's none of their concern.

No, maybe she won't. She's kept Jeffrey's secret all these years—and it might make Ainsley hate him. Ainsley shouldn't have to live with hate.

Why hasn't she ever married? She claims it's because no man should have to live with her schedule. Mama isn't supposed to know it, but several have tried. She hopes Ainsley isn't planning to have any of them coming to visit while she's home.

"For heaven's sake, don't tell Mama. She'd never understand how we could get carried away."

"You'd just better pray you didn't get caught, or the whole world will know."

"I heard if you go the bathroom right after—"

"Don't be so dumb. I suppose *he* told you that. Boys!"

Jeffrey.

Where do they think they came from? Do they think they invented passion? They weren't born out of a sense of duty. No, sir.

She takes dustcloth and dustmop after Ainsley's room. How many nights did they catch the child crouched at the window watching the darkness in case something magical happened, while Janice slept. Jeffrey blamed it on stray gypsy blood from the distant past. Funny, but once she got to Chicago, she stayed there. So much for gypsy blood.

Bart stops in on his way home from work. He allows himself a fifteen minute visit every Tuesday and Thursday, never enough time for her to seriously answer his questions.

"How are things, Mama? Anything need doing?"

"Everything's fine. Mr. Bolton checked the furnace and the plumbing. I'm ready for winter."

"I'll be by to put the mower away."

"Not yet. I think we'll have another warm spell before it turns cold."

"How do you always know, Mama?"

"Witchcraft." She smiles at him.

She'd enjoy the visits more if she didn't have the feeling that somewhere on an appointment calendar there is written, "Tuesday—Thursday. Visit mother. Give her at least fifteen minutes." It's all right, though. Sometimes on Thursday evening she goes with friends for a spaghetti supper and then bingo. What will she do with Ainsley when she goes out with her friends?

"Was I really Daddy's pet, Mama? Jan and Cath always said I was."

"Your dad didn't favor one over the others."

But someday she's to give Ainsley first choice of his mother's jewelry. Without letting the others know, of course. Daughter of his heart.

Cathy wants her to come to Florida for a few weeks. She hasn't specified when. Maybe while Ainsley is home. It isn't as if she's coming for a visit. She needs to hide for a time. She can do that without her mother. They will talk about it. The only thing is—

Jeffrey, if I go to Florida, I can't take you with me. We were never there together so you will have to stay home. Maybe if you'd taken me places then, when I wanted to go with you, I could take you with me now.

Ainsley will be here with you. You'll like that. Even though you said you understood, you didn't really, when she left so quickly.

She fixes a simple supper in the microwave and eats in the living room, entertained by two court shows. She knows the first one has real actors, hasn't she seen that witness on a soap, but it's the most

engrossing. She cheers the hero, hisses the villain as well as the villain's lawyer, and nearly always agrees with the judge's decision.

Jeffrey.

Lamar Danvers has been coming around. His Elvira died six months ago. I think he's looking for a cook. She always said he couldn't find the kitchen with a map. But don't worry. Except for the trip to Florida when Cathy sets a time, I'm going to stay here with you. Always remembering you.

The kids don't like Lamar much anyhow. He's a lazy stuffed shirt. The house doesn't seem to like him either. It doesn't open up to him.

Jeffrey, I'm going to tell Ainsley. She can do with it what she will.

That decided, she carries her dishes to the kitchen. When the evening news comes on, she settles herself for a nap. She can catch the same local news at eleven. Dan Rather's voice sinks in, but not enough to wake her. She doesn't want to know when the rockets are coming anyhow.

She used to be so fearful of the rockets it made her wonder what was the use of making plans of any duration. Now she doesn't give them much thought. They can't be any more devastating than her own personal explosions. Almost losing Lee in the war no one understood. Jeffrey. Jeffrey changed after that.

It took almost losing a son to bring Jeffrey home for good. She is grateful for that. Grateful too that Lee is working for the VA instead of needing it.

The idiotic game show wakes her, and she goes to do her dishes. Not many for one day but too many to leave for the next day.

I'm going to tell her, Jeffrey.

Ainsley, that is your name because it's the name I gave you. Not your father. Ainsleyville was the town where he used to make overnight stops. He brought you home from there when you were eight days old. Your mother hadn't been very strong and died of a weak heart. He told me she was the widow of a friend of his.

Ainsley, I went to the library and looked through the Ainsleyville papers. A young woman had fallen down a flight of stairs, breaking her neck. Her traveling salesman husband found her just shortly after it happened. After a brief police investigation, he took the baby to live with distant relatives.

Not so distant, Ainsley. Not really so distant, my youngest daughter.

Jeffrey,

She uses all her mental strength to call him up to where she can see him sitting at the dinette table. He always read the paper while she did the dishes. Once he was home for good, he seemed to need her company. She relishes their times together, still treasuring them.

Jeffrey, I'm going to call Cathy and accept her invitation—after Ainsley has been here a while. And I'm not going to tell her after all. That would make her stop being my daughter.

She takes a stroll through the house, now for the most part in darkness. It doesn't matter. She knows where she is, and she knows he is there with her.

He will always be there, walking the rooms with her.

Ainsley arrives home Friday morning as planned. Instead of her bulky word processor, she has brought her old portable. She is much too thin. There will be no trip to Florida just yet. Ainsley needs her. Something has upset her child's life terribly.

"Oh, Mama." Ainsley turns in a circle with her arms outstretched, wanting to hug everything at once. She hugs her mother.

"No wonder you want to stay here. Can't you just feel Daddy in the very air? He never really died, did he? He's still here, loving us."

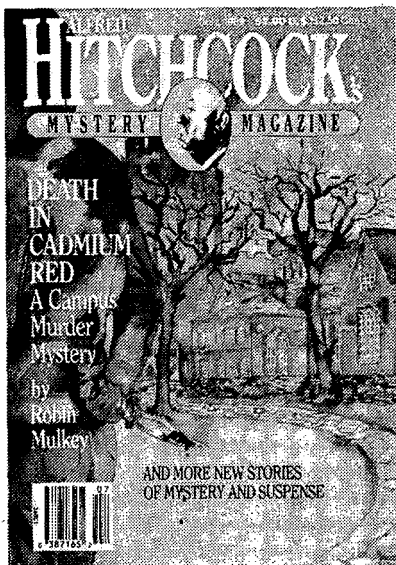
"He's still here."

Refusing help, Ainsley takes her belongings to her room. She'll unpack before she does anything else. She's like that about her things, but not her life.

There is time to make fresh coffee and set out a Sara Lee coffee cake.

Oh, Jeffrey, your daughter is going to help keep you alive. We are going to talk about you and remember you so much that you'll never be able to stop wandering the house with me. What you did to that girl, Jeffrey, I went along with because it was the only way I could keep my new daughter, but I never forgave you for making me pay such a price. No, you'll never stop paying the price, too.

My Jeffrey.



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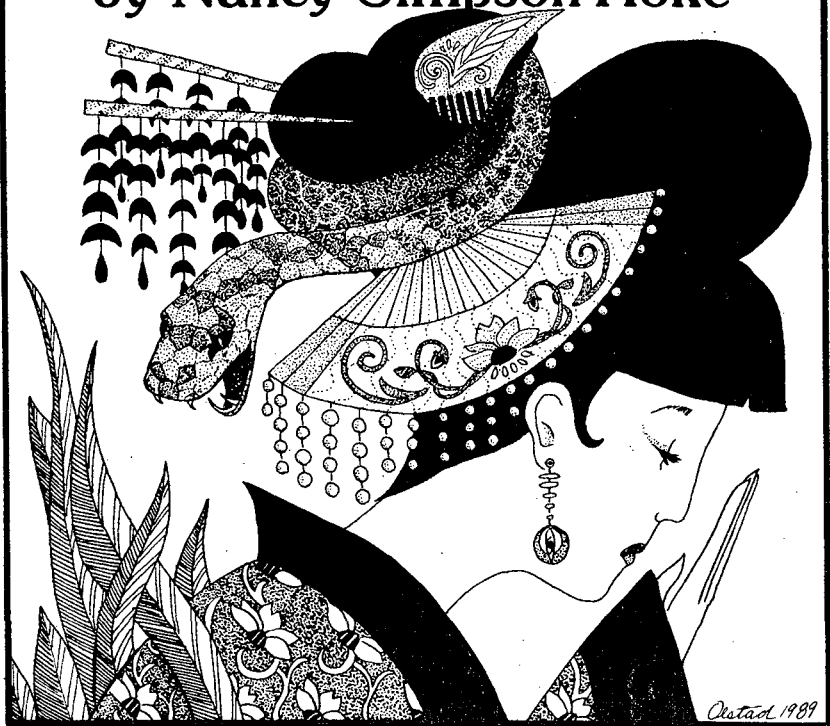
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Habu

by Nancy Simpson Hoke



I tell the Americans I am Zakimi-San, the snake oil salesman. Their faces, blistered by the island sun, show the embarrassment. Then they smile. I spent two of my youthful years in Los Angeles, so I know that in America a snake oil salesman is he who is a fraud, a con man.

But the oil and venom of the Habu are prized by my people. The ointment made from its flesh can soothe man's diseased skin. The fine yellow venom powder can stir the worn heart.

Hai. Some believe the powder can also give to the old man the secret strength of the youth and bring joy to the shared futon. Others say it can bring children to the empty womb, but these things have not been proved.

The men who draw the venom and mix the powder for me are schooled men. They wear the white laboratory coat and have much data.

Habu in life is an ugly serpent of so bad temper that he will throw his body from a tree to attack the man who disturbs the grass beneath his resting place.

The bite of Habu is a thing of horror. If the antidote is not quickly given, Habu bite causes the inner body to pour blood until the vitals are squeezed and the blackened skin bursts. Many rural people go on a single foot or tend the loom with stubs instead of fingers because cutting was the only antidote to Habu in older days.

When I was a boy, there was a Magic Man who went from village to village to earn his rice. We would gather to watch him poke his opened basket until the Habu came forth and fell into the dust. Women bit their fists in silent terror. Men stood by with sticks in case Habu moved outward of the circle Magic Man had drawn around the basket. But Habu has not the nature of the other snakes. He will not flee when he may instead show his demon spirit.

All men are Habu's enemy and the sound of Magic Man's bamboo flute drove Habu to madness. Habu would strike, one-third part of his body flailing out at an angle from the tight coil. Magic Man would dance in and out of the places where the fangs might reach his thin, scarred legs. The end would come when the Habu had exhausted himself with wasted attacks. Magic Man would grab the Habu behind the head and snap the spine back and forth until the jaw fell slack and venom began to drip harmlessly from the fangs. Then a woman would run forward with a bowl and catch the pale glistening drops.

For three days Magic Man would do his dance *Sore-kara*, he would go to the next village, his bags of rice and baskets dangling from a pole balanced across his shoulders.

The Magic Man had great courage, but it was not his dance that showed this. Habu is a night hunter. His wicked temper is not lessened by daylight, but the small hot eyes are not so sharp and his strike is not so true. Habu is wise. He hides himself during the hours of light when his power is weakened.

Ano, it was at night that the Magic Man must hunt the Habu and capture Habu in the shadows of the jungle. Into the dark within the dark Magic Man would go, searching for Habu in the many caves of our island. Only a brave and simple man would earn his rice in such a way.

It saddens me to tell that Magic Man died from the Habu bite, but it is so. As he grew old, Magic Man became too brave. Because of the many bites he had endured, Magic Man believed Habu was no longer his enemy. Perhaps he became careless. Perhaps his senses were diminished by age.

Magic Man's body, his split skin covered by red sucking ants, was recognized only by the empty baskets flung beside him. His bamboo flute had been bitten in many pieces during his death agony.

Sumimasen. I have wandered from the story I first began to tell.

In the time before the war the richest man in the villages south of Nagagusuku was a farmer named Nakamura Shizuo, whose father and grandfather had also been rich men. By the time of my story, Nakamura was no longer a young man. The noise of the world was less troublesome to his dulled ears, and many days he could eat nothing but soba in plain broth.

The great turtleback tomb which housed the Nakamura ancestors had been honored with the funeral urns of two wives. It was no fault of Nakamura, who was a lenient man. Each wife had been chosen for her robustness and strength, but sad to say, science was yet an unhatched chick in the villages of those days. First wife had three sons and died. Second wife, less fortunate, had three daughters and died.

Nakamura became lonely, but saw no girl in the village who gave yearning to his heart. Kind friends invited Nakamura to join them in visits to the geisha houses of Naha. He would shake his head with a smile and say, "*Kane yori mo kodomo*," which means one may laugh freely with one's children, but not with one's money. Nakamura counted his yen very carefully.

During those days there came to the village a girl named Naoko, whose father had been swept over the seawall by a typhoon. Naoko was comforted by her uncle's family. Uncle had no daughters and was happy to have such a beautiful person in his house. When it was time for silence and hard work, Naoko worked quietly. When it was time for amusing stories and laughter, Naoko would make

Uncle laugh and cheer the spirit of Aunt.

Naoko was not only beautiful and obedient. Naoko also was able to play the shamisen, plucking the stiff strings with pale curved fingers. No other girl in the village could do such a thing, but as Naoko had no money or father, she did not give jealousy to their hearts.

So proud was Uncle of late Elder Brother's child that he would ask special friends to honor him by hearing Naoko play the shamisen and sing. Aunt would kneel beside Naoko to insure propriety. Uncle and friends would sip awamori from square wooden cups and sigh at the sweetness of Naoko's voice and the pale curve of her fingers.

It was so that Nakamura first saw Naoko, for Nakamura and Uncle were friends. The sight of Naoko, her face warmed by the lantern light that cast delicate shadows against the shoji, filled Nakamura with joy. A great waterspout of youthful feeling poured into his heart. He forgot his painful bowel and remembered love.

Nakamura wished nothing more of life than that Naoko should be his wife.

If my story now would end, all would be well. Even a girl of Naoko's beauty must eat and be clothed and sheltered. To have all needs provided by a husband who is captive to her good will is a woman's perfect fortune.

But Nakamura nor Uncle nor Aunt nor friends knew of Takaesu Yasunori, the secret of Naoko's soul.

Takaesu was a young man from the village of Naoko's father. As tiny children, Takaesu and Naoko had sought each other for companionship. It was to each other they ran when the jishin shook the earth of the island, tumbling the women's crockery and up-setting water gourds.

Together they chased the silky mongoose and skipped across the coral rocks. It was Takaesu who pulled the hateful sea urchin spines from Naoko's small bleeding foot. It was Naoko who playfully stuck the stems of wild lilies in Takaesu's ears. Everyone of the village knew that someday a marriage would be arranged between their families.

Takaesu's father had affection for Naoko, but he had many other thoughts. He wished his eldest son to be educated, and sent Takaesu away to school. There Takaesu learned to be ambitious. He wished to be a great scholar and go to school in Tokyo where he might become a doctor.

Naoko trembled with grief when Takaesu left the village to begin his studies in Tokyo. She had never seen a map, but she saw clearly that many miles would be between them. How could he be happy in leaving her? She was puzzled by his ambition, which seemed a great boar devouring the flowers of love. Made bold by desperation, she asked Takaesu could not a student in Tokyo have a wife? Takaesu laughed at this, and his laugh cut into her heart.

His love for Naoko remained for a long time. If her face would fade from his memory a little while they were apart, it was only to astonish him by its beauty even the more when he returned to the village on holiday. *Shikashi*, alas, the astonishment became like that of one who sees a stranger for the first time, not that of one seeing a beloved one with new eyes.

When Naoko's father died, she had not seen Takaesu for a year. The tears which fell over the incense sticks were full of self-pity. Naoko was now an orphan, and the one with the power to heal her loneliness did not come to her.

Uncle did not know of Takaesu, for Naoko did not disturb Uncle's tranquility with such a silly thing.

Uncle thought it great luck that Nakamura wished Naoko for his wife. If she were truly his daughter, instead of his brother's daughter, Uncle could not wish a better husband for her. The roof of Nakamura's house was tile, not thatched sea grass. Nakamura had many stone pig pits, and each held a fat sow and litter. The six children of Nakamura were grown and respectful. If Nakamura was old enough to be grandfather as well as husband to Naoko, so much the better. The old man has less fire with which to weary a young girl.

Naoko dared not oppose Uncle. Had he not been kind to her when she had no other?

Ano. Naoko became Nakamura-San, and good things came to her. The lacquer of her rice bowls was inset with mosaics of iridescent shell. The tatami of her house were as thick as her obi was wide. Pink pearls and bright stones dangled from her hair ornaments. A white gecko within a black sphere, the crest of Nakamura's family, was embroidered five times on Naoko's kimonos. Her kimono silk was brought by ship from the mainland.

If she saw written on the bill of lading the kanji for Tokyo, no tears came. But silently she would trace the lines with a pale curved fingertip.

Nakamura's eldest son and son's wife shared Nakamura's house,

as did their children. All were respectful of Naoko. If Stepson's Wife was envious of Naoko's jewels and kimonos, the bite of her envy was made toothless by the work of Naoko's hands and Naoko's dutiful attention to Stepson's children.

Indeed, Naoko was fond of her husband's family. In the many wifely ways, she sought to please Nakamura. Takaesu became a tender twilight of memory.

The marriage was visited by but two sorrows. Sorrow one was that there was no child of her own body for Naoko to tend. I cannot say why this was so. Nakamura did not know Naoko longed for a baby. He had six children and many grandchildren and did not share her need.

Of more importance to Nakamura was the second sorrow. The terrible goblin which lived in Nakamura's belly gave such suffering that he was fearful of dishonoring his house by voicing his pain. It was a fretful goblin that would leave him in peace for many days, then return to bring torment.

Friend Uncle was aware of the second sorrow. He humbly sought to convince Nakamura to find a modern doctor. Nakamura refused. The modern ways of medicine frightened Nakamura almost as much as the goblin. Also, he feared the trip to Naha over the mountains would kill him.

Imagine Friend Uncle's happiness when he heard that a modern doctor had returned to a nearby village to honor the graves of his ancestors during the O Bon festival.

Patient listener has surely guessed that the young doctor was Takaesu.

The years in the great city had been bitter as green tea leaves for Takaesu. His quickness of learning had brought him many honors, but he lacked the worldly knowledge of his peers and they addressed him with polite contempt. Takaesu was puzzled by their jokes, and felt ungainly in the presence of their polished ways.

The open, earthy manners of Takaesu's village were unsuited to university society, and his oafish speech offended even his own ears. He ceased to speak unless it could not be avoided. They called him "Hamaguri," the creature of the coarse shell who hides beneath the sand.

Takaesu was ashamed of his shyness, and his shame caused him to withdraw further into his studies. He hardened his heart against loneliness and grew suspicious of the few who offered friendship.

His life had but two joys. The first joy was that of learning, both

for its own sake and because Takaesu surpassed all who despised him when the examinations were given.

The second joy was his memory of Naoko. It is a curious thing, but the more he yearned for her, the more he avoided returning to see her. The complete devotion of her beautiful person made the indifference of his fellow students more painful.

As I have told, Takaesu did not return home for many months. The students of Takaesu's school were hurriedly finishing courses in fear that the call to war would interrupt their studies.

Takaesu's father wrote a gentle letter to tell his son of Naoko's fortunate marriage. He did not see Takaesu's despair.

In time Takaesu accepted the way of fate. He cast off all waking thought of Naoko, but, as the blossom thrown to the sea may return many times, so did Naoko come into Takaesu's dreams.

It was the Year of Tatsu that Takaesu became a doctor of medicine. It was the Year of Saru when Uncle walked to Takaesu's village to seek help for Friend Nakamura.

Uncle was astounded that one so young, not yet a father, could have knowledge of disease and suffering. Can the head without a single grey hair hold wisdom? And yet Uncle saw many heavy books in Takaesu's house, and strange sharp tools as cold and clean as moonlight. He remembered Nakamura's pain and asked Takaesu to honor his friend with healing.

Nakamura was glad of Takaesu. The serious young man brought hope to his house and modern doctor's medicine, which, in truth, brought relief to Nakamura's belly. In the joy of his gratitude, Nakamura talked with Takaesu as friend to friend, and discovered that Takaesu and Naoko had been children together.

It was so that Nakamura's fate was cast, for he brought Naoko into Takaesu's presence. If he had not done this, perhaps my story would end differently. Naoko had wisely hidden herself away when she heard of Takaesu's coming.

Naoko would not lift her eyes to Takaesu's face. But beneath her lowered eyelids, pale and lustrous, she saw much. How strange did this tall man seem with his carefully combed and oiled hair and the strange black suit that encased each leg. Naoko trembled with confusion.

Takaesu's hatred for Nakamura began at the moment he beheld Naoko and knew he still loved her. Each sweet hope that had fallen blighted and worm-ridden at Takaesu's feet seemed to be embodied by Nakamura. The aged farmer blindly had taken the last tender

shoot rooted in Takaesu's heart. To see Naoko as another's wife, subject to another man's will, was unbearable for Takaesu.

Takaesu departed Nakamura's house, never intending to return.

It was Nakamura who unwittingly summoned his new enemy. The goblin awoke with renewed insolence. Nakamura wished more of Takaesu's medicine.

This time the doctor's hand was heavy with resentment as the medicine was prepared. Takaesu began to wonder why Nakamura, who knew no pleasure in living, should stand as a poisonous reef separating Naoko from the sea of Takaesu's love. He did not wish Nakamura well.

Takaesu told Nakamura that he might live many sorrowful years, but in time the goblin would surely consume him unless he went to the city hospital and allowed a surgeon to cut away the goblin. Takaesu explained that his medicines were merely a thing of the moment, not a cure. In this, Takaesu spoke honorably.

But Nakamura, in his sickness, had become a child again. He whined and sighed and wept and refused to listen to those who would help him.

Takaesu determined to end the old gentleman's suffering in such manner that his own happiness would be assured.

In the time before the sun rises from the sea, Takaesu dressed in the sedge hat and kappa of the farmer and set out for Nakagusuku castle ruins. The empty vial dangling from his obi would not be empty when he returned.

Magic Man, sprinkling water on the grave of a lordly ancestor, did not recognize Takaesu. It had been many years since their paths had crossed in the village of Takaesu's father. Magic Man saw only a young stranger, breathless from a long journey, who wished to buy Habu venom powder. It was readily given, for the young man traded in money, not rice, and Magic Man wished to buy a radio.

Kami sama arigato! Many men and women have consumed the Habu venom to the benefit, and no sickness came to them. But Takaesu knew that a man with a bleeding wound within the bowel should not take the venom in any form.

Still he pretended to be Nakamura's friend, offering medicine only when Nakamura insisted and imploring his patient to go to the hospital in Naha. All the while Takaesu knew that Nakamura would never leave his village.

Takaesu drew Naoko unknowing into his plot. It was into her

pale, curved hands that he placed the vial of liquid, grainy and golden like raw silk. It was to be given to Nakamura when he complained of pain. So-perceptive listener must know that this liquid contained Habu powder that Takaesu had bought from Magic Man at Nakagusuku.

Ano. Nakamura died. He died in such terrible pain that the tatami beneath his bed was shredded by his own hands as he thrashed free of life. With him at the passing of his spirit were Naoko, a young servant girl named Toshi, and Stepson's Wife. It was they who cleaned away the filth and prepared Nakamura's body for the great clay funeral urn.

Takaesu was sent for, but could not be found.

What now? Takaesu, upon hearing that Naoko was a widow, came to her house to honor her husband's departed spirit and comfort her. Stepson turned him away coldly, saying that Naoko was praying and must not be disturbed.

Takaesu was astonished. For many months, he had been an honored guest in Nakamura's house. If he no more than heard the soft whisper of Naoko's feet pass behind him as she moved from room to room, it gladdened that day. Now he was not to be admitted to Nakamura's house!

Takaesu would have been more astonished had he known the reason for Stepson's cold way with him. Stepson's Wife had told Stepson that Takaesu truly had not used all his skills to cure Nakamura. After all, the doctor who cures his patient is paid no more, Stepson's Wife said. In truth, the family of Nakamura still owed Takaesu many yen.

What she did not say to her husband was that she had seen the way Takaesu looked at Naoko, pouring a brazier of fire into a glance. No man had ever looked at Stepson's Wife with such ardor, and her heart hardened toward Takaesu because of it.

For many days, Naoko did not come out from Nakamura's house. Takaesu would inquire of Toshi, the servant girl, if all was well with late master's widow.

Toshi was very shy and frightened of the young doctor. She would bow and nod many times, but remained silent until the birth of her sixth brother.

The only daughter of a poor fisherman, Toshi lived with her family beside the sea, several kilometers from the village of Nakamura's family. When her mother brought Sixth Brother into the world, the baby's umbilicus wound would not heal properly. Toshi

begged her father to allow her to bring the young doctor. Toshi's father wished his sixth son to live, but had no money. Doctor must be willing to accept the most beautiful of sea bream as his fee.

Takaesu was, indeed, willing. As Toshi showed Takaesu the way to her father's house, he gently questioned her about her employer. She hid her mouth behind her hand when she spoke, and turned her head aside in embarrassment. But, like all women, she yearned to talk, and little by little she became unafraid of Takaesu.

He learned that Stepson's Wife was no longer so respectful of Naoko. She allowed her children to pull the ornaments from Naoko's hair. Stepson's Wife laughed when the children teased Naoko with the spiders they stole from yellow sticky webs.

Naoko was now mistress only of the cooking fire and must prepare meals for the family. Toshi liked Naoko very much. Naoko was kind and did not throw the fish entrails at Toshi's face as Stepson's Wife would do when angered.

Takaesu knew that Toshi's father provided fish for the Nakamura family. It was Toshi's task to carry the fish to the Nakamura house, one basket on top of her head, and as many as three others hanging from a bamboo yoke. It was a most delicate responsibility at times, for the sea bream is sliced and served while yet alive, and must be borne in a filled water jar.

Takaesu had set upon another plan to reach Naoko. He healed the sixth son of Toshi's father. Takaesu then was free to ask a favor of Toshi's father. Could Toshi, on her walking journey back and forth to her father's house, carry small messages of advice and packets of medication to Takaesu's patients who lived along the road? There were yet no telephones in the west of the island, and at times it was a hardship to find a messenger to go to the isolated houses along the coast.

Toshi's father, grateful for his son's healed umbilicus, was honored that Toshi could be of service to Takaesu. He advised that Stepson's Wife might be happier not to know of their arrangement. Takaesu agreed.

Rainen no koto wa iu to, oni ga warau! Devils laugh when men plan for tomorrow!

Toshi gladly did as Takaesu asked. He was careful not to require too much of her time. Perhaps a packet of sleeping powder was delivered to elderly Higa-San on one day. Perhaps directions for cleaning the coral-scraped leg of Uehara-San's nephew were delivered during the week that followed.

Many messages had been secreted in Toshi's baskets before he placed one in her sleeve and said it was for Nakamura Naoko, and no business of any other. Toshi was a simple soul and did not examine the motives of such lofty personages as Takaesu Yasunori.

Through the steam arising from a kettle of miso-shiru the message was passed from Toshi to Naoko. Naoko unfolded the paper with trembling hands.

"The sun which shines on your head is colder than the hidden heart that honors you."

The words touched Naoko, who was lonely. She knew, without asking, the name of him who had written them. So separate did she keep herself from the life of the village that she had feared Takaesu was gone from the island without taking leave of her. She rejoiced to be remembered.

In the months that came and went, Naoko received many such messages, couched in the suitor's words of flowers and waterfalls, before she dared to respond. Naoko's message, delivered from Toshi's basket, spoke of treasured memories of a small girl and a small boy together.

Naoko dared not tell Stepson's Wife of Takaesu's letters. If Stepson refused to allow them to marry, Naoko would be forced to return to Uncle's house. To be cast out from Nakamura's house would bring dishonor to Naoko and also to Uncle's house. Naoko decided to wait patiently. She again might win the good will of Stepson's Wife. But the gods were thinking other thoughts.

There is but one more personage in my story: Stepson's younger brother, a dull, lazy fellow who liked to spend his days contemplating the many fronds of the palm tree. Younger Brother had never married. Stepson and his wife agreed that Naoko would do well to be Younger Brother's wife. Naoko pleaded that she was too recently sorrowed to be given to another. The more she pleaded, the more insistent were Stepson and Stepson's Wife.

Would Naoko act with more daring than she had ever shown? *So desu*. She wrote Takaesu of her plight, in words unblunted with lover's prose, and begged for his advice.

At the final crossing of the comet of fate, Takaesu again hesitated. If he abducted Naoko, and married her without her family's consent, many people who had come to trust his medicine would no longer seek his service. If they left the island, what chance of success had they in the cities of Honshu without inheritance or social connections?

And yet . . . could he bear to live and see Naoko wed to the son of a man he, Takaesu, had hastened into his grave?

Toshi's feet moved with the speed of one who bears important news as she carried a final message to Naoko. She was to accompany Toshi to the midway point of Toshi's homeward journey, a roadside icon at the foot of Kyu bridge. There, in the next to last hour before dawn, Takaesu would speak to Naoko of what they must do.

At the proper time, as quietly as the clouds pass over the moon's face, Naoko crept from Nakamura's house. She was wrapped in a black cloak under which she carried a small lantern, its flame obscured by the folds of her garment. A dagger trimmed with a gold tassel was hidden in her obi. Naoko had determined that whatever fate pursued her, she would not return alive to Nakamura's house.

It was before the appointed time that Takaesu arrived at the meeting place. He carried the large electric lantern he used for night visits to patients, but did not turn it on. Takaesu did not wish even the fruit bats that shook the leaves above his head to know of his errand.

In the distance, two kilometers away by the twisted hillside road, Takaesu saw a small shimmering light. Surely it was Naoko and Toshi. And if it were not? He decided to climb up into the shadow cast by the limestone canopy overhanging the entrance to a shallow cave. He stepped carefully, switching on the lantern away from the direction of the approaching light.

With the natural fear of dark, unseen things, Takaesu allowed the beam to wash across the maw of the limestone walls, and was happy to see a cluster of baskets piled to one side. *Hai dozo*. He smiled. Toshi had been so moved by the urgency of Takaesu's command that she had dropped her baskets that she might not be hindered.

Takaesu began to relax, even to lighting a cigarette and sitting down upon the thick spiraled rope that formed the lid of the largest of the baskets. As he was able to see quite well the moonlit path framed by the dark mouth of the cave, he turned off the electric lantern and waited in the blackness.

Bikkuri! A man's voice, hissing with anger, came to Takaesu. He first thought his hiding place was discovered, and his treachery also, but then! The voice of Naoko came to Takaesu's ears, whispers of entreaty and weeping words of shame and unhappiness. Takaesu

heard apart from these the frantic squeals of another female, the miserable Toshi.

Stepson said he had followed Naoko and knew she intended to dishonor Younger Brother by going in secret to another man. No! no! Naoko insisted. She was only going to the house of Toshi's father because of sickness there. She had not wished to disturb the sleep of Stepson and Stepson's Wife by telling them of her going.

Takaesu listened and was astonished at how convincingly Naoko pled her innocence. What clever thoughts behind the pale brow! Had Stepson's anger changed Naoko's heart? Would Naoko deny him? If she did not, would not Takaesu be blamed for seducing Naoko into deceiving Stepson?

Takaesu's thoughts moved from one consideration to another like the moth trapped in a jug who throws himself from side to side.

It was at this moment that the jishin shook the island, and Naoko and Stepson were thrown to their knees. They clung to each other as even enemies are driven to do when terror is the prod.

Within the cave, Takaesu fell off the basket and was frightened to see that great clods of earth and stone from the ledge overhanging the mouth of the cave were falling. The moonlit view of the world outside the cave was smaller. Takaesu's way of passage was not sealed, but jishin may come with many followers. Takaesu feared that a second jishin might make escape impossible. On his belly he crawled toward the entrance, his movement obscured by swirling dust, and began scooping the clods away with his hands.

Stepson was urging Naoko to return with him. They must assure themselves that Stepson's Wife and children were safe. They must see that no fires had begun from overturned lanterns or sparks scattered from the charcoal hibachi.

Takaesu did not see Naoko's eyes sweep helplessly about her. He did not see her fist pressed against her lips when Stepson promised that Stepson's Wife would be more respectful of Naoko in the future. Takaesu only heard the scuffle of geta on small stones as Naoko and Stepson hurried away together on the same path they had come.

Another tremble from the gods! Only a slice of night sky remained to be seen from Takaesu's hiding place. He began to dig with all his strength. The noise of his breathing, and the loud drum of his heart filled his ears. He did not hear the soft movement behind him. *Abunai!* A creature who did not fear the dark and his like-minded brothers were finding their way to the warm manflesh squirming toward the moonlight.

As Naoko and Stepson and Toshi departed hastily in one direction, another was approaching the foot of Kyu bridge from the other side with equal haste. Magic Man was returning from a luckless night's hunt. He did not choose to pursue Habu when jishin was shaking the earth. Magic Man wished to retrieve the spare baskets he had hidden away earlier. These baskets held the captives of the last night's more successful hunt.

Was that the scream of the wildcat that came to Magic Man's ear? Had all her kits been smothered in their den to cause her such pain?

Indeed, there was no luck for Magic Man on that night. Yet a third jishin, more powerful than the two that came before, flung Magic Man against a rock and lashed him with a stricken pine branch. By the time he had recovered his senses and found the cave, its entrance was completely filled except for the smallest of vents. A spiral of moonlit dust marked the space where the cave still drew breath.

Magic Man had no intention of thrusting his hands into a cave where eight Habu (most cursed of numbers, most hateful of serpents!) had been left in darkness. He must hurry to the village and warn others. Children must not play in that place for many months.

Not many months but many years passed before anyone again entered the cave above the foot of Kyu bridge. The great war came, with suffering immeasurable. Stepson died, as did Younger Brother (then Naoko's husband), and many others.

Naoko and Stepson's Wife were drawn together by their sorrow and came to be truly as sisters. They left the sad village with the surviving children of Stepson's Wife and moved to the north. In time, their sorrow was worn thin and beautiful as beaten gold. Naoko and Stepson's Wife opened a restaurant and made much money. Naoko did not marry again.

It was a great earth-moving machine, digging the place beside the crumbled bridge to make way for a fine hotel, that reopened the cave. The rotted remains of Magic Man's baskets and the skeleton of a man were no longer hidden from sight. By the first shaft of sunlight that struck the skeleton, workmen saw a pale cave gecko scurry through the domed ribs where once a heart had been.

—The Heart— of the World

—by Ben Satterfield—



Snowcroft liked to drive fast, and he sped down the wide avenue like a fireman answering a triple alarm, the Mars light on the roof of the unmarked car flashing a red warning.

Ritter braced one arm against the dashboard and smiled. "You never let a corpse get away, I bet."

"Quick response is department policy," Snowcroft said dryly.

"You're going to get a gold star—"

Just then a gray BMW pulled out from a side street in front of them, causing Snowcroft to swerve into the oncoming lane as he whipped past the car.

"If you don't kill us first."

"People don't pay attention," Snowcroft said, airing one of his peeves. "Think because they drive a thirty thousand dollar automobile they have the right of way and everybody has to look out for them." He checked a sign on the avenue corner, braked suddenly, and wheeled onto a clean treelined street, making the turn with only a slight squeal of tires. "We're on the spot," he said, and pointed to a patrol car parked at the curb in front of a small frame house on the corner of the cross street. Neighbors, those sentinels of misfortune, were milling about on the sidewalk across from the cruiser. "Like flies around a cow's flop," Snowcroft muttered.

"Those people pay our salaries," Ritter said. "Now they want to see us earn them. Pull in."

As they turned into the driveway they saw a uniformed policeman at the rear of the house quickly straighten his posture from a slouch and push a comic book he had been reading out of sight. "Think he's studying for the sergeant's exam?" Ritter quipped, hooking his I.D. onto the breast pocket of his coat.

Snowcroft shook his head. "Some of these new guys are as bad as civilians."

They got out of the car and looked around. The grass had been recently mowed, edged,

and watered; the shrubbery was trimmed and healthy; the house and everything around it looked more than well-kept, they looked loved. A fig tree by a detached garage was in blossom. Huge elms canopied the house, and the walkway to the front door was bordered with a dozen varieties of flowers in clumps like pieces of a crumpled rainbow.

Another uniformed officer met them at the door. His nameplate said PETRUSEK, but his manner said *rookie*. He was young and pale and kept moving about, fidgeting like a kid on his first date. "I'm glad you guys are here," he blurted, then nodded at Ritter. "Lieutenant."

"Your partner isn't," Ritter said. "We interrupted his self-improvement program."

Frowning, Petrussek looked back and forth between Ritter and Snowcroft, uncertainty filling his eyes. "He said he was going to stand by the back door while I stayed here with the..." He blinked, then scanned the living room, waving his hand as if he thought the rest of his sentence needed no words.

"He's there all right, letting the taxpayers see how well their money's spent. Where's the body?"

The young cop pointed. "Behind the sofa. Name's Sarah Vane, V-A-N-E, a widow, lived alone."

Used as a boundary for a din-

ing area behind it, the sofa was in the middle of the room, facing the front door and a color television set in a console that took up most of the space between the door and the window. From the ceiling in front of the window hung a planter basket with luxuriant ivy dripping yards of green trail. In the corner two parakeets chirped and flitted about in a cage suspended by a macramé rope above a walnut table holding a large glass bowl with live goldfish in it. Curled languidly beneath the table, a Burmese cat looked at the policeman with depthless golden eyes, then rested its head on its paws as if bored.

"Except for her pets," Petrussek added as he watched another cat, identical to the one in the corner, rub against Ritter's leg.

A frail and wrinkled woman who could have been any age between seventy-five and ninety lay partially against the back of the sofa, her legs bent in what would have been a very uncomfortable position for a live person. She wore a short-sleeved print housedress with a cameo brooch pinned at the neck. Her hair was slate gray, thin, and tucked behind her ears with old fashioned bobby pins, one of which was dangling from a loose strand of hair. Ritter noticed a patch of dried blood on her scalp near the

crown and more on her left cheek, which was bruised and swollen under the eye. He lifted her arm, checking temperature and resilience, and let it drop. Except for a gold wedding ring the fingers were bare.

"Call the M.E. and get the forensics wagon down here," he said to Snowcroft, who was halfway out of the room before Ritter turned to Petrussek. "Who found the body?"

"A neighbor across the street, Mrs. Winkleman." He swallowed and glanced down the hallway. "She's, ah, she's in the bathroom."

Ritter stood up, frowning at the young officer, who seemed to grow paler.

"I know, I know," Petrussek said, both hands fanning in front of him, his voice beginning to whine. "I shouldn't have, but she's an old lady and she was upset."

"So am I." Ritter sighed and looked around the room. "You touch anything?"

The kid brightened. "Oh, no, sir, not a thing. We were all very careful."

"All?"

"I mean my partner, Harris, too."

"Oh, I thought you might've meant the entire neighborhood. A picture flashed through my mind of you conducting a tour through here like it was Disneyland."

Some color blazed the kid's cheeks. "Ah, I think Harris already sent for the examiner," he mumbled, looking away as if talking to himself.

Ritter went into the open front bedroom and looked around. Everything, including the closet, was orderly. The bed was made and a woman's imitation leather purse with hand straps lay on top of the blanché chenille spread near the mound of pillows. With one finger he lifted the cover flap and opened the mouth of the purse wide enough to see its contents—and to see that it contained money.

The back bedroom door was touching the casing, but not closed. Ritter nudged it open with his foot and looked into a child's room, a cubed anachronism with a faded forty-eight-star flag and huge bleached posters of Flash Gordon and Captain Midnight on the walls, a single bed with a patchwork quilt cover, a chifforobe with a framed black and white picture of Gene Autry on top, a pair of empty painted shelves beneath the window, a small mahogany desk opposite the bed with a P-38 Lightning model airplane, a toy pistol, a tube of Koloid cement, some pencils with a hand sharpener, a battalion of lead soldiers, and a school notebook dated 1942 on it. Above the desk, suspended from the ceiling, were two more American

fighter planes, a P-40 Warhawk and a P-47 Thunderbolt.

He went back to the living room but before he could ask Petrusek about the room, the bathroom door opened and a white-haired woman hobbled out leaning on a hickory cane with a thick rubber ferrule. "I found her," she said, looking up at Ritter from her stoop like a turtle from its shell. "I'm Lottie Winkleman, she was dead, and I called the police straight-away."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm Lieutenant Ritter, and the big fellow coming in the door is Sergeant Snowcroft."

"Snowcroft," she said, studying the name and the man. "You have any relatives in St. Louis?"

"Ah, no, I don't believe so." He gave Ritter a quizzical look.

"I went to school with a Marretta Snowcroft. Be thankful you're not related, that woman was a bitch."

Ritter grinned.

"I called the police, like I said. I was rattled, of course, and used this phone without thinking—but I didn't touch anything else." She hobbled past the three men and sat down in an overstuffed armchair with antimacassars on it. "I've seen all the Perry Mason shows. I knew you'd be dusting for prints and I didn't want to mess up your evidence."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Winkelman," Ritter said, "we almost never get any prints off a phone that tell us anything. Even the clumsiest killer will wipe—"

She thumped her cane against the floor and Ritter stopped. "I came over at five o'clock—" she lifted a pendant watch that hung from her neck by a wan silver chain and peered at it through steel-rimmed bifocals—"thirty-seven minutes ago. You see, I was going to help her with dinner. Every Friday night we play bridge with some other ladies and it was Sarah's turn as hostess, but if I don't help with the food, she'll forget something."

"Yes ma'am," Ritter said. "I wonder if you could—"

"She was a good cook, mind you, but just forgetful. I wasn't criticizing."

"I didn't think you were," Ritter said.

"One time she served strawberry shortcake and forgot the whipped cream. And that reminds me . . . I've got to call the other ladies and let them know."

"Did you see anyone going in or out before you came over?"

"The laundry man . . . always comes on Wednesday. He left, oh, about half past four. I went in the kitchen then to check on my soup. I had a pot of split pea soup cooking."

"So between four thirty and

five o'clock, you don't know whether anyone was here or not?"

"No, I told you, I was inside tending to my soup and making snacks. The last thing I saw leave was the truck."

Ritter nodded to Snowcroft, who left to talk to the neighbors.

The old woman pursed her lips and stared out the window, frowning. "Now that's odd."

"What?"

"That I didn't see him come out. I live in the house cater-cornered across the street, so I can see this front door clearly. I was on the porch and saw the truck—a van, I guess, one of those panel trucks—back into the driveway. The young man took a dry cleaning bag to the door. Ten or fifteen minutes later, he drove out and away."

"Did you notice the name of—"

"All-American Cleaners. I don't use them myself, they charge too much."

"Anyone else?" Ritter had decided to make his questions as short as possible.

"The lawn service people were here from about three to four. I knew that would nettle Sarah, because she likes the grass cut and the watering done early in the day. But it's impossible these days to get service when you ask for it. I told Sarah she ought to—"

"Excuse me, Mrs. Winkleman, I see the truck from our forensics laboratory has just pulled up. The medical examiner will be here soon also, and I think it would be a good idea for us to—"

"Say no more, I'm ready to leave." She thumped her cane on the floor twice and pushed herself up.

"Before we go, can you tell us if you notice anything out of place—"

"Not a stick."

"—or if anything's missing?"

"Nothing. I've been in this house a thousand times and it's as familiar as my own. I know you're looking for a motive, but Sarah didn't keep any money in the house to amount to anything and didn't own any jewelry worth stealing, much less worth killing for."

Petrusek opened the front door for her and held it, but Mrs. Winkleman stopped to shake her cane at the television set as though putting a curse on it. The TV was a large-screen model in a pecan veneer case made to resemble real furniture, and a vase of fresh flowers centered upon a white doily rested on top of it along with a crystal candy dish. "That's the most valuable thing she owned. Bought it last summer, paid a thousand dollars for it, which I thought was outrageous. I tried to talk her out of it, but

she wouldn't listen to reason. She had a deaf side to her nature. I'm not criticizing, just telling the truth. Some people called her stubborn, others said she was daft, but she wasn't. Like everybody else, she had her good and bad points, but there were blind spots and deaf spots and that's all there is to it."

They walked past the police truck, and Ritter nodded to the pair of lab men as they unloaded. "If she could afford such an expensive set—"

"I know what you're thinking, but she didn't have a lot of money. She had some stocks her father left her, but nothing grand."

"She was a widow?" As they crossed the street, he noticed more people were outside now, collecting in groups, huddling together and talking softly.

"I see what you mean. You think maybe her husband left her well off. No, he got killed in the war forty-five years ago. She got something from the government, just as she did when her father died, but not nearly enough for the grief she had to bear, I'll tell you. That woman suffered, there's no doubt about it. Oh, she managed all right, but she wasn't rich and she never carried more than fifty dollars on her, so whoever killed her didn't do it for money."

"Then why?"

Mrs. Winkleman stopped and stared at him with tears in her eyes. "Maniac!" she cried, hitting her cane against the bottom step of her front porch. "It's a damn maniac!"

Ritter took her elbow and helped her up the steps to a rocking chair on the porch. She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue she had been holding in her left hand, then began rocking slowly.

"She had a son, born in 1930, the year after the Big Crash. She used to say he was the only good thing that happened that year. Her father was in the government, so they got along all right. He was Jim Donahue, ever hear of him?"

Ritter shook his head.

"He was a WPA man, and later some kind of bureau chief in Washington. Sarah was his only child and so James—that was her son's name—was his only grandchild, and he made sure they were provided for. So you know she lived well in the Depression."

Ritter nodded.

"Not fancy, mind you, but well. The war came along, big Jim had a heart attack. Only sixty-three or -four but overweight. Died pruning shrubs in the back yard. Fell right into a pyracantha bush, had scratches all over his face and chest. Her husband joined the army even though he would never have

had to go. Not at forty with a wife and child. But he was that kind of man, not one to shirk." She looked to the west, where a blood-red sun seemed to hover on the horizon. "Pretty, isn't it?" she said, causing Ritter to turn and follow her gaze. "You'd think even the sun would be ashamed to look on a world of such evil," she said, staring as if she could see in the hazy smear of sky the madness that raged and killed and made the world a dangerous place. "It's intolerably sad."

Ritter nodded again, then turned back to the old woman and cleared his throat. "Mrs. Winkleman—"

"He was overseas when James drowned," she resumed, her eyes again on him. "Thirteen years old, a tragedy. Losing her son and her father the same year did something to Sarah, she was never the same."

"How?" Ritter said quickly.

"She developed a blind side and a deaf side, what I was telling you about. Then her husband got killed in the Normandy invasion, and that clinched it."

"What?"

"Something happened in her mind, she began to blot things out. She'd talk about her father, her son, and her husband as if they were still living. You saw the boy's room, didn't you? Everything in it just like it was when he was alive. It's a little

eerie, I think, but I never said anything to her about it. I can understand how she'd want to hold on to something. And she kept the door closed usually, so it wasn't like she was trying to show it off to anybody. If she knew you real well or took a liking to you, she'd show you the room, but she had to trust you."

"Mrs. Winkleman, I want to thank you—"

"No need for that."

"You've been a great help."

She stopped rocking and looked at him intently. "The righteous perisheth and no man layeth it to heart," she quoted.

Ritter wasn't sure what "layeth it to heart" meant, but he knew it was what he had to do. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Will you find who killed her?"

"We'll do our best."

She grunted. "I hope that's good enough." Her gaze drifted to the west again. "So sad," she said, looking at the sunset.

When Ritter got back to the Vane house, Petrussek was nowhere in sight and a medical examiner named Gould (usually referred to as "The Ghoul" by homicide officers) was on his way out. "Cause of death—broken neck," he said, pausing at the door and knocking ash off his cigar into the candy dish on the TV, black bag in hand. A

short portly man with a sallow face and tightly curled black hair combed straight back, he wore a dark rumpled suit and a loosened maroon tie with a large stain in the center. "Possibly a fractured skull, too. Somebody hit her real hard."

"When?"

"Can't say exactly. Shock has a funny effect on rigor mortis."

"Was she shocked?"

"Greatest shock of all, the big D." He chuckled, his belly quivering under his gray shirt.

Eyes screwed tight, Ritter said, "What else can you tell me, other than she wasn't shot, stabbed, or hit by a truck?"

The M.E. shrugged. "What do you want, the name and address of the killer?"

"I don't expect quite so much help, so I'd be satisfied if you could nail down the T.O.D."

"An hour." He pulled the corners of his mouth down, holding out the bag in one hand and his cigar in the other. "Hour and a half, give or take ten minutes. The autopsy'll tell us more. She wasn't raped, though. The only poke she took was from a fist."

"That was more than enough."

"Yeah, she was old, at least eighty, probably eighty-five or more. One solid punch and Slugger gave her the big D."

"You're developing a graveyard humor."

The M.E. smiled, showing teeth that looked dirty. "Occu-

pational hazard." One of the cats nosed around his shoe, sniffing his cuff, and he kicked it away.

Ritter glared at him. "Would you like to hear about the hazard of my occupation?"

"Uremic poisoning, I imagine, from drinking so much coffee."

"No, that's not it."

The doctor stuck the cigar in his mouth and looked at his watch, raising his eyebrows. "You aren't going to tell me that if you don't bust this case, you'll be writing parking tickets?"

"No, the real hazard is in exposure."

The M.E. shook his head slowly and puffed on the cigar. "We all get that."

"No, I don't mean murder and mayhem, I'm accustomed to the grim realities. I mean a different kind of exposure, one that's more disgusting and harder to take."

"What's that?"

"Exposure to assholes like you."

Snowcroft stayed within the speed limit, the Mars light under the dash. Several times he glanced at Ritter, who was staring straight ahead and rubbing his jaw.

"You shouldn't've said that to the M.E."

Ritter didn't answer.

"Not that he didn't have it coming, I'm with you. But he'll make waves sure as the *Queen Mary*, and we have to work with those guys. You know how the chief is about good relations."

"Forget that. If there's any flap, I'll say the M.E. was being crude and insensitive — unprofessional. That'll burn his cookies. Did you hear his findings? 'Broken neck, *maybe* a fractured skull.' That's sloppy. He might as well've said she didn't die in bed for all the help he was."

"Well, those guys're cautious outside of the morgue. They don't like to say much before the carving unless it's something obvious."

"The obvious I can see for myself."

"Still—"

"And *shock*—did you hear that crap he was giving me?" Ritter snapped. "As though he figured I'd never heard of cadaveric spasm."

Snowcroft took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. "What got to you?"

"Sarah Vane, little old lady, kept a neat house, loved flowers and living things. Harmless, defenseless, alone. Somebody, for some reason—or maybe no reason—snuffs out the tiny bit of life she has left, then that roly-poly runt of an M.E. makes jokes."

"It's a defense mechanism."

"With him I'm not so sure."

They stopped in front of the All-American Cleaners and Laundry, whose glassed double doors were wide open. Inside, a henna-haired woman was complaining about the cost of cleaning a chartreuse pantsuit and a violet skirt. As she talked, she flung her arms about, rattling the multicolored bangles on her wrists. She was wearing magenta lipstick, a beltless lemon yellow dress that Ritter estimated to be a size twelve, smoke-gray hose, and black shoes with two-inch heels.

"It's criminal to charge so much, it's just *criminal*!" She snatched her clothes by the hangers and huffed out, the polythene bag trailing in her wake, her heels clacking like castanets.

The clerk, a thin hollow-chested man with rimless glasses and a weak chin, let his breath out in a huge sigh and dropped his shoulders to indicate how put-upon he felt. Then he took a deep breath, adjusted his clip-on tie and tried to smile, but didn't quite manage it. Putting his hands on the counter, he said, "Can I help you," sounding as though he hoped to hell not.

Snowcroft took a leather packet from his coat and held it open so that the clerk could view his shield and identifica-

tion card. "I'm Sergeant Snowcroft and this is Lieutenant Ritter," he said. "Homicide."

"Homicide!" the clerk said, then smiled genuinely as if the prospect of someone he knew being in serious trouble delighted him. "I'm Edwin Sayre, the assistant manager. What can I do for you?"

"We just need some information," Ritter said.

The man looked disappointed.

"How many delivery trucks are out?" Snowcroft asked.

"None. We deliver between nine and five only. The drivers come to work at eight thirty and leave at five thirty—and believe me, they don't work a minute overtime."

Snowcroft handed him a square of paper with the name and address of Sarah Vane on it. "We'd like to talk to the driver who delivered some cleaning to this customer today."

"He's not here. As I told you, the delivery men leave at five thirty. Sharp."

Ritter and Snowcroft just stared at the man, who looked back and forth between them, then opened his mouth wide, making a smacking sound. "Oh, I see, you want his home address."

They nodded.

"Well, I'll have to get that from the office." He indicated

a small unlit room behind him with windows on three sides. "Be right back."

Five minutes later he returned with a man's name, date of birth, social security number, and address on a three by five card which he gave to Snowcroft. "Sorry to be so long, but I'm not totally familiar with the way the records are kept."

Snowcroft looked at the card. "How long has this Harold Crume worked here?"

The assistant manager smiled. "I figured you'd want to know that, so I checked. Nine months, he came last summer. What did he do, kill somebody?"

"Why do you say that?" Ritter asked casually.

"Come on, you're from homicide, aren't you? You must be investigating a murder."

"Mr. Sayre, what time do you close?" Snowcroft asked.

"Eight o'clock. Just as the sign on the door says, open from eight to eight."

"We may be back."

"If so, make sure it's before eight. I close up promptly."

Ritter called for a check on Harold Crume, not expecting anything, and was informed that he had no yellow sheet, but had been arrested numerous times as a juvenile. No record was available.

"That doesn't mean a lot,"

Snowcroft said. "I got in trouble myself as a kid."

"Not me," Ritter said. "I was a veritable angel."

"I'll bet."

"Never got caught, anyhow. Isn't that what *veritable* means?"

Snowcroft pulled into the parking lot of a large apartment complex that was going to seed. All the buildings were identical and painted the same dull color, desert sand it was called. There were cracks in the walls of the buildings and the asphalt of the parking lot had ridges and holes in it. "What's the number?"

"One-six-two. You're in luck, no stairs."

"Speaking of luck, I hope we get something here. Otherwise, we're back to 'Go,' and that's nowhere."

When the door to apartment 162 opened, Snowcroft presented his identification and asked Crume, who only glanced at the badge, if they could come in and talk.

"Yeah, I, uh, sure," Crume said, backing away from the door. He wore faded jeans, a T-shirt with the Superman triangular S insignia on it, and dirty tennis shoes with broken laces. Of average height and stocky, he had thick shoulders and muscular arms, small dark eyes and thinning brown hair that covered his ears. His nose

turned up at the tip and his mouth was set in an unhappy cast, as though he fully expected the worst from life but could never get used to receiving it. A portable television set was blaring, and he turned it off with a slap of his hand as if angry with it. Four empty Pabst Blue Ribbon cans stood on a coffee table in front of a worn and stained chesterfield that sagged in the middle. On the wall above the sofa, a huge poster of the Incredible Hulk stared intensely at them.

"You delivered some dry cleaning to Mrs. Sarah Vane this afternoon," Snowcroft said.

"Yeah, a coupla dresses, sure. Why?"

"What time did you leave her house?"

"About four-thirty, why?"

Snowcroft took out a small notebook and scribbled something in it. "Four-thirty, you say?"

"Yeah, it was my last stop."

"How was Mrs. Vane?" Ritter asked.

"Fine."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yeah I'm sure. She was fine."

"She wasn't when we saw her. Shortly after you left."

"Whatta you tellin' me?"

"She was dead."

Crume looked at Ritter, then at Snowcroft. "What, uh, I mean, what's it gotta do wi' me?"

"You were the last person known to see Mrs. Vane alive."

"Hey, anybody coulda done it, I just deliver cleaning." He backed up a step and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Drivin' a comp'ny truck, gotta expect people're gonna see me."

Ritter said, "You haven't run foul of the law in some time, have you?"

"What's that mean?"

"As an adult, you seem to've kept clean."

Crume's eyes were as hard as a boxer's fist. He stood perfectly still, as though fighting to contain some inner rage. "You can't use that juv'nile stuff. Furthermore, the record was supposed to be ex—expunged. That's what the judge said."

"It's sealed, but not expunged," Ritter said.

"And seals can be broken, right? Okay, I get it, so what?"

Ritter smiled. "Nothing."

"Then why bring it up?"

"I merely observed that you haven't been in trouble for a long time."

"I ain't in trouble now. Whatta you think, I'm *due*? Is that how you guys operate?" He paused for a response, then went on. "Look, if somebody knocked off the old lady, they'd want to sneak in and out, not drive up to the front door in a truck with their name on it. Didn't you think of that?"

Ritter and Snowcroft looked at him and said nothing.

"Whatta you want from me? She was fine when I left, that's all I can say. That's it."

"Are you right-handed?" Ritter asked.

"Right-handed?" Crume frowned as if he didn't know how to answer, then took his hands out of his pockets and looked at them. "Uh, yeah, I'm right-handed. Most ever'body is."

"The man who hit her was right-handed."

"So? Like I say, that's most people. What're you gonna do, arrest ever'body who's right-handed?"

"And I suppose you don't know why someone might've wanted to kill her?"

"No, why should I?"

"You know something, don't you?"

"No."

Ritter stared at the man. "We'll see. You spending the evening here?"

"Yeah, sure. Why?"

"We'll want a statement, need your signature."

Silently they walked back to the car. Inside, Ritter leaned back against the headrest and closed his eyes. "He's our man."

"Probably," Snowcroft said, keying the ignition.

"Not probably. He did it."

"The guy's defensive, hates cops—but that doesn't mean

much these days. Did you pick up something else?"

"My Geiger counter was singing the whole time, but that might be because the guy's a lump of hostility that radiates like nuclear waste."

"He's got big hands, too, but his knuckles weren't skinned or bruised that I could see. 'Course he could've worn a glove or wrapped his fist. . . . What was that about a statement?"

"Just wanted to let him know we'd be back. He's the one, all we have to do is prove it."

Snowcroft snorted. "How? No prints, only circumstantial evidence—and the coroner isn't going to say she died at exactly four thirty, you know."

"I'd like to tie this one up without the coroner's help, which is going to be none. In fact, I'd like to finish before he does."

"Fat chance."

"All we need is a little luck."

Snowcroft started the engine and looked at the clock in the dashboard. "Where to now?"

"Let's go find some luck."

"It's almost seven."

"You're hungry, huh?"

"I know you lose your appetite when you're busy, but I get a headache if I don't eat."

"Tell you what," Ritter said. "We'll eat as soon as we wrap this case."

"Oh boy, here comes a migraine."

The patrol car was gone and the lab men were wrapping up when Ritter and Snowcroft got back to the Vane house. A chalk outline was on the floor where the body had been.

"She was struck here," the forensics expert said, standing between the two bedroom doors. His name was Nelson; he wore bow ties, was very thin and blinked his eyes a lot. "Her head hit right here—" he indicated a spot on the wall. "There's a slight indentation and we found a hair, one of hers. She crumpled to the floor and was dragged behind the sofa. No sign of a struggle and she was struck only once, probably with a fist. No sign of ransacking or that *anything* was disturbed. All the prints we picked up seem to be the same, except for the front door and the bathroom doorknob."

"Anything unusual?"

"The kitchen doorknob on the inside was clean. Somebody wiped it."

"What's it look like to you?"

"No sign of forcible entry, so she opened the door to whoever killed her."

"Then it was someone she knew, someone who didn't want to leave prints."

"Not much, is it?"

"Thanks." Ritter walked into the kitchen and looked around. Then he went back into the liv-

ing room, trying to force his eyes into seeing something that had been overlooked. He went into the front bedroom, then into the child's room.

"Nelson!" he yelled, and the thin man scurried into the room, followed by Snowcroft. "Where did that come from?" Ritter asked, pointing to a comic book on the floor.

"Oh, that. One of the uniformed men had been looking at it."

"Why'd he leave it here?"

"It's where he found it."

"What?"

"Said it belonged here."

"I hope he knows where he belongs, because it sure isn't on the force." Ritter scanned the room slowly. "Get Mrs. Winkleman," he said to Snowcroft, who nodded and left.

Nelson frowned. "Did we miss something?"

"No, you did fine," Ritter said, and sat down in the chair at the desk. "Just fine."

He was sitting there fifteen minutes later petting one of the cats when Snowcroft returned with Mrs. Winkleman. He stood up to greet her, holding the cat in his arms.

"What in the world is it? I've got a houseful of upset ladies to tend to, and you must realize it's no pleasure coming over here, not any more."

"I understand, and I only

want a moment of your time. Now, would you look around this room . . . and tell me if you see anything."

"What do you mean, *see anything?*"

"Please look, Mrs. Winkelman." He stepped to her side. "Carefully. Take your time."

"I don't have to waste time, I already see what you're after. The shelves are empty. Everything else is the same."

"What—"

"I would've noticed it before but I didn't come in this room," she said as if defending herself. "The door was shut, I recall."

"Yes, ma'am," Ritter said, putting the cat down gently. "What was on the shelves?"

"His comic books. They were stacked up there by the dozen. Trashy things, I would've thrown them out, but Sarah kept everything just the way James left it."

"Thank you, Mrs. Winkelman," Ritter said, rubbing his hands together. "Very much."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, ma'am, you've been a great help. I won't take any more of your time."

"Comic books! I hope you know what you're doing. I sure don't. A waste of time if you ask me." She turned and started out, then stopped suddenly and said, "Who's going to take care of these animals?"

"You just made it," the assistant manager said. He looked at the huge round clock on the wall at the end of the counter. "Two minutes before eight," he said, and showed his teeth. "What can I do for you this time? *Quickly.*"

"You keep records of all deliveries, don't you, Mr. Sayre?" Ritter asked.

"Of course."

"And the drivers keep records of where they go and when?"

He sighed, glancing at the clock. "It works like this, lieutenant: we give the drivers batches to be delivered in their area, and they work out a travel route."

"And you keep a copy of these routes?"

"Well, they're more like work sheets, but we have them, yes."

"We'd like to see Crume's route sheet for this afternoon."

"Whatever for?"

"Could we see it, please?"

"I suppose so. That is, I don't see why not." He went into the office and came back with a clipboard, from which he took a green sheet of paper containing a list of names, addresses, notations, and check marks. He handed the list to Ritter and said, "I never liked Crume. It wouldn't surprise me if he did something awful. He's surly and resents taking orders."

"Mr. Sayre, we'd like to keep this for a while. If you need the record, we'll make a photocopy."

"I suppose you'd better, just in case." He looked at Ritter and sighed again. "You aren't going to tell me anything, are you?"

"It's closing time," Ritter said.

Crume opened the door and scowled. "You guys again." The television was off and the coffee table now held five beer cans.

"We're kind of in a hurry," Ritter said, pushing the door all the way open. Crume backed up and glowered at them. "You see, Sergeant Snowcroft gets a headache if he goes long without eating, and he hasn't had dinner yet."

"So go eat," Crume said.

"I told him we'd do that after we got our killer. As a matter of fact, I'm getting hungry, too."

"There's a Jack inna Box onna corner, three blocks down."

Ritter smiled. Snowcroft closed the door and stood in front of it, arms at his side.

"Hey, what is this?"

Ritter pointed to the poster behind the chesterfield. "The Hulk, that's a comic book character, right?"

"Was on TV, too."

"One of your favorites?"

"Hey, look, *what is this?*" Crume's eyes darted back and

forth between the two detectives.

"You like comics, don't you?"

"So what?"

"So Mrs. Vane had a lot of them. I say *had*. You know what happened to them."

"No, why should I?"

Ritter stared at him. "You tell me."

"I can't tell you nothin'."

"Then how did you know she had been murdered?"

"You said." As if seeking confirmation, Crume looked at Snowcroft, who, with a blank expression, folded his arms in front of him.

Ritter shook his head. "No, I said only that you were the last person to see her alive."

"Well, I mean, you're *cops*, that says it, you don't get involved in nat'ral causes."

Something about this statement made Ritter pause before reaching inside his coat and removing the copy of *Action Comics* that he had found at Mrs. Vane's. "You left this one behind."

Crume looked at the flimsy cover and his eyes widened, then shifted. "Never saw it before."

"Is that why you left it?"

"I mean, I don't know nothin' about it. Which's what I said, wasn't it."

"You were nervous or in a hurry and dropped it. But you

might as well've left your wallet for us, it was that big a mistake."

"You guys're making the mistake," Crume said, licking his lips. "Leave me alone."

Slowly Ritter rolled the magazine into a paper club and tapped it into his palm. "You know we can't do that, Harold."

"You tryin' to prove somethin' from a comic book?" Crume belched, put his hands in his pockets, then took them out and laced his fingers together, holding on to himself.

"That's just a start. Why'd you back your truck in at the Vane house?"

"Aw, I do that a lot," Crume said, his voice losing even the pretense of conviction, sliding into a monotone. "Makes it easier to get back on a street."

"I could understand that if there was a lot of traffic, but there isn't on that street and you could've parked in front."

"I make it easy on myself. Ask the neighbors—they'll tell you it's what I usually do."

"But you don't usually go in the front door and come out the back, do you?"

Crume's head jerked up and his small eyes glittered like wet marbles, then went dead as color drained from his face. He shuddered, looking away.

"Premeditated murder," Ritter said, taking out Crume's route slip. "You've got Mrs.

Vane down as your third stop, and according to the city map that's logical. But you didn't make that third stop even though you had a delivery a few streets over."

Crume opened his mouth, then began to tremble, looking as if he might cry. "I forgot," he said at last, his voice quaking. "I went for coffee and skipped a stop. It was just a mistake."

"I couldn't agree more. You went to the Vane house last because you planned to kill her and take the comics. Which you did. You left by the back door because you didn't want anyone to see you taking the books out. And just in case, you wiped the kitchen doorknob. Then you drove here, dropped the comics off and went back to the cleaners, arriving there at five twenty. You turned in your slips and checked out."

Crume, his head nodding slightly, looked at the floor as if lost in his own thoughts.

Snowcroft took a card from his pocket and read the Miranda warning. When he finished, Ritter said, "The comics, where are they?"

Crume trudged into the bedroom, the detectives behind him, and pulled a cardboard box from beneath the unmade bed. Snowcroft opened it to reveal two stacks of comic books from the late thirties and early forties. "Look at this," Crume said,

taking one out and cradling it in his hands like a sacred text. "*Detective Comics*, May, 1939, the first time Batman appeared. D'you know how much this one alone is worth?"

Holding the pulp paper with its vivid colors in front of him, he looked at Ritter, but did not see that his face was drawn and worn, like that of a man who had just survived an ordeal of the human heart and was awed by it, not yet able to assimilate his experience, and certainly unable to understand it.

"I layeth it to heart," Ritter said, and Snowcroft turned his head and stared at him.

Crume seemed not to hear, moved only by the cheap treasures before him. "And they're all in great condition. Look! *Superman*, *Green Lantern*, *Captain Marvel*—these're worth thousands today!"

"But not worth a life."

"The old lady, she didn't know nothin' about how valu'ble they are. I offered to buy 'em, but she wouldn't sell, said they were her son's."

"They were," Ritter said.

Not understanding, Crume shook his head in fierce denial. "She was looney."

"And what are you?"

"She didn't know nothin' about value," Crume whimpered, and seemed to shiver with gall. "They were no good to her. What did she care about 'em?"

Ritter did not bother to answer.

Crume dropped the comic book and slumped as if an oppressive weight were bearing down on him. "I guess I shoulda known," he sniveled. "No matter what, nothin' ever turns good for me."

"It's a rotten world." Ritter handcuffed Crume and ushered him out of the room, then went back for the box of comics, moving slowly. "Okay," he said. "Let's go."

Snowcroft opened the door, taking the prisoner by the arm. "Well, it looks like I won't get a migraine after all."

"I love happy endings," Ritter said, but his voice was flat enough for a dirge.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

----The Seal of---- Solomon Cipher

by Robert W. Chambers

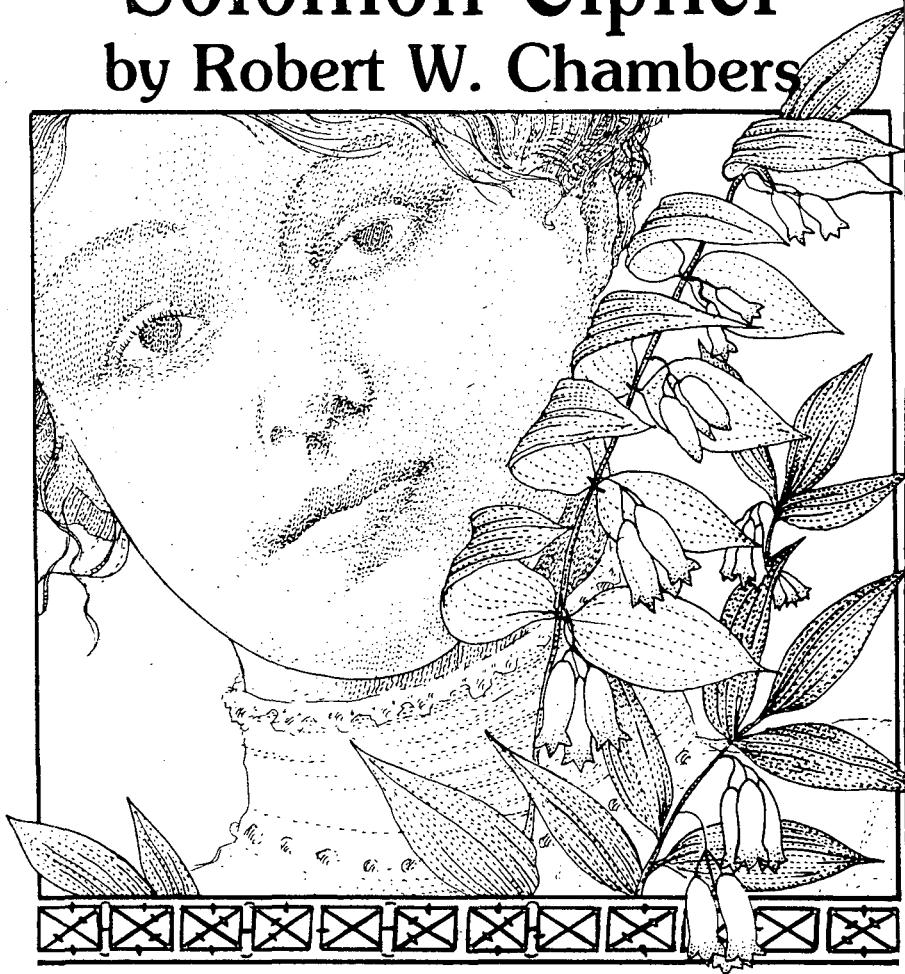


Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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Young Harren drew from his pocket a card. It was the business card of Keen & Co., and, glancing up at Mr. Keen, he read it aloud, carefully:

KEEN & CO.

TRACERS OF LOST PERSONS

Keen & Co. are prepared to locate the whereabouts of anybody on earth.

No charges will be made unless the person searched for is found.

Blanks on Application.

WESTREL KEEN, Manager

Harren raised his clear, gray eyes. "I assume this statement to be correct, Mr. Keen?"

"You may safely assume so," said Mr. Keen, smiling.

"Does this statement include *all* that you are prepared to undertake?"

The Tracer of Lost Persons inspected him coolly. "What more is there, Captain Harren? I undertake to find lost people. I even undertake to find the undiscovered ideals of young people who have failed to meet them. What further field would you suggest?" Harren glanced at the card which he held in his gloved hand; then, very slowly, he re-read, "the whereabouts of anybody *on earth*," accenting the last two words deliberately as he encountered Keen's piercing gaze again.

"Well?" asked Mr. Keen laughingly, "is not that sufficient? Our clients could scarcely expect us to invade heaven in our search for the vanished."

"There are other regions," said Harren.

"Exactly. Sit down, sir. There is a row of bookcases for your amusement. Please help yourself while I clear decks for action."

Harren stood fingering the card, his gray eyes lost in retrospection; then he sauntered over to the bookcases, scanning the titles. The Searcher for Lost Persons studied him for a moment or two, turned, and began to pace the room. After a moment or two he touched a bell. A sweet-faced young girl entered; she was gowned in black and wore a white collar, and cuffs turned back over her hands.

"Take this memorandum," he said. The girl picked up a pencil

and pad, and Mr. Keen, still pacing the room, dictated in a quiet voice as he walked to and fro:

"Mrs. Regan's Danny is doing six months in Butte, Montana. Break it to her as mercifully as possible. He is a bad one. We make no charge. The truck driver, Becker, can find his wife at her mother's house, Leonia, New Jersey. Tell him to be less pig-headed or she'll go for good some day. Ten dollars. Mrs. M., No. 36001, can find her missing butler in service at 79 Vine Street, Hartford, Connecticut. She may notify the police whenever she wishes. His portrait is No. 170529, Rogues' Gallery. Five hundred dollars. Miss K. (No. 3679) may send her letter, care of Cisneros & Co., Rio, where the person she is seeking has gone into the coffee business. If she decides that she really does love him, he'll come back fast enough. Two hundred and fifty dollars. Mr. W. (No. 3620) must go to the morgue for further information. His repentance is too late; but he can see that there is a decent burial. The charge: one thousand dollars to the Florence Mission. You may add that we possess his full record."

The Tracer paused and waited for the stenographer to finish. When she looked up: "Who else is waiting?" he asked.

The girl read over the initials and numbers.

"Tell that policeman that Kid Conroy sails on the *Carania* tomorrow. Fifty dollars. There is nothing definite in the other cases. Report progress and send out a general alarm for the cashier inquired for by No. 3608. You will find details in Vol. XXXIX under B."

"Is that all, Mr. Keen?"

"Yes. I'm going to be very busy with—" turning slowly toward Harren—"with Captain Harren, of the Philippine Scouts, until tomorrow—a very complicated case, Miss Borrow, involving cipher codes and photography—"

Harren started, then walked slowly to the center of the room as the pretty stenographer passed out with a curious level glance at him.

"Why do you say that photography plays a part in my case?" he asked.

"Doesn't it?"

"Yes. But how—"

"Oh, I only guessed it," said Keen with a smile. "I made another guess that your case involved a cipher code. Does it?"

"Y-es," said the young man, astonished, "but I don't see—"

"It also involves the occult," observed Keen calmly. "We may need Miss Borrow to help us."

Almost staggered, Harren stared at the Tracer out of his astonished gray eyes until that gentleman laughed outright and seated himself, motioning Harren to do likewise.

"Don't be surprised, Captain Harren," he said. "I suppose you have no conception of our business, no realization of its scope—its network of information bureaus all over the civilized world, its myriad sources of information, the immensity of its delicate machinery, the endless data and the infinitesimal details we have at our command. You, of course, have no idea of the number of people of every sort and condition who are in our employ, of the ceaseless yet inoffensive surveillance we maintain. For example, when your letter came last week I called up the person who has charge of the army list. There you were, Kenneth Harren, Captain Philippine Scouts, with the date of your graduation from West Point. Then I called up a certain department devoted to personal detail, and in five minutes I knew your entire history. I then touched another electric button, and in a minute I had before me the date of your arrival in New York, your present address and—" he looked up quizzically at Harren "—and several items of general information, such as your peculiar use of your camera, and the list of books on psychological phenomena and cryptograms which you have been buying—"

Harren flushed up. "Do you mean to say that I have been spied upon, Mr. Keen?"

"No more than anybody else who comes to us as a client. There was nothing offensive in the surveillance." He shrugged his shoulders and made a deprecating gesture. "Ours is a business, my dear sir, like any other. We, of course, are obliged to know about people who call on us. Last week you wrote me, and I immediately set every wheel in motion; in other words, I had you under observation from the day I received your letter to this very moment."

"You learned much concerning me?" asked Harren quietly.

"Exactly, my dear sir."

"But," continued Harren with a touch of malice, "you didn't learn that my leave is up tomorrow, did you?"

"Yes, I learned that, too."

"Then why did you give me an appointment for the day after tomorrow?" demanded the young man bluntly.

The Tracer looked him squarely in the eye. "Your leave is to be extended," he said.

"What?"

"Exactly. It has been extended one week."

"How do you know that?"

"You applied for extension, did you not?"

"Yes," said Harren, turning red, "but I don't see how you knew that I—"

"By cable?"

"Y-yes."

"There's a cablegram in your rooms at this very moment," said the Tracer carelessly. "You have the extension you desired. And now, Captain Harren," with a singularly pleasant smile, "what can I do to help you to a pursuit of that true happiness which is guaranteed for all good citizens under our Constitution?"

Captain Harren crossed his long legs, dropping one knee over the other, and deliberately surveyed his interrogator.

"I really have no right to come to you," he said slowly. "Your prospectus distinctly states that Keen & Co. undertake to find *live* people, and I don't know whether the person I am seeking is alive or—or—"

His steady voice faltered; the Tracer watched him curiously.

"Of course, that is important," he said. "If she *is* dead—"

"*She!*"

"Didn't you say 'she,' captain?"

"No, I did not."

"I beg your pardon, then, for anticipating you," said the Tracer carelessly.

"Anticipating? *How* do you know it is not a man I am in search of?" demanded Harren.

"Captain Harren, you are unmarried and have no son; you have no father, no brother, no sister. Therefore I infer—several things—for example, that you are in love."

"I? In love?"

"Desperately, captain."

"Your inferences seem to satisfy you, at least," said Harren almost sullenly, "but they don't satisfy me—clever as they appear to be."

"*Exactly*. Then you are *not* in love?"

"I don't know whether I am or not."

"I do," said the Tracer of Lost Persons.

"Then you know more than I," retorted Harren sharply.

"But that is my business—to know more than you do," returned Mr. Keen patiently. "Else why are you here to consult me?" And as Harren made no reply: "I have seen thousands and thousands of people in love. I have reduced the superficial muscular phenom-

ena and facial symptomatic aspect of such people to an exact science founded upon a schedule approximating the Bertillon system of records. And," he added, smiling, "out of the twenty-seven known vocal variations your voice betrays twenty-five unmistakable symptoms; and out of the sixteen reflex muscular symptoms your face has furnished six, your hands three, your limbs and feet six. Then there are other superficial symptoms—"

"Good heavens!" broke in Harren; "how can you prove a man to be in love when he himself doesn't know whether he is or not? If a man isn't in love, no Bertillon system can make him so; and if a man doesn't know whether or not he is in love, who can tell him the truth?"

"I can," said the Tracer calmly.

"What! When I tell you I myself don't know?"

"*That*," said the Tracer, smiling, "is the final and convincing symptom. *You* don't know. *I* know because you *don't* know. That is the easiest way to be sure that you are in love, Captain Harren, because you always are when you are not sure. You'd know if you were *not* in love. Now, my dear sir, you may lay your case confidently before me."

Harren, unconvinced; sat frowning and biting his lip and twisting his short, crisp mustache which the tropical sun had turned straw color and curly.

"I feel like a fool to tell you," he said. "I'm not an imaginative man, Mr. Keen; I'm not fanciful, not sentimental. I'm perfectly healthy, perfectly normal—a very busy man in my profession, with no time and no inclination to fall in love."

"Just the sort of man who does it," commented Keen. "Continue."

Harren fidgeted about in his chair, looked out of the window, squinted at the ceiling, then straightened up, folding his arms with sudden determination.

"I'd rather be bolloed than tell you," he said. "Perhaps, after all, *I am* a lunatic; perhaps I've had a touch of the Luzon sun and don't know it."

"I'll be the judge," said the Tracer, smiling.

"Very well, sir. Then I'll begin by telling you that I've seen a ghost."

"There are such things," observed Keen quietly.

"Oh, I don't mean one of those fabled sheeted creatures that float about at night; I mean a phantom—a real phantom—in the sunlight—standing before my very eyes in broad day! . . . Now do you

feel inclined to go on with my case, Mr. Keen?"

"Certainly," replied the Tracer gravely. "Please continue, Captain Harren."

"All right, then. Here's the beginning of it: Three years ago, here in New York, drifting along Fifth Avenue with the crowd, I looked up to encounter the most wonderful pair of eyes that I ever beheld—that any living man ever beheld! The most — wonderfully—beautiful—"

He sat so long immersed in retrospection that the Tracer said: "I am listening, captain," and the captain woke up with a start.

"What was I saying? How far had I proceeded?"

"Only to the eyes."

"Oh, I see! The eyes were dark, sir, dark and lovely beyond any power of description. The hair was also dark—very soft and thick and—er—wavy and dark. The face was extremely youthful, and ornamental to the uttermost verges of a beauty so exquisite that, were I to attempt to formulate for you its individual attractions, I should, I fear, transgress the strictly rigid bounds of that reticence which becomes a gentleman in complete possession of his senses."

"Exactly," mused the Tracer.

"Also," continued Captain Harren, with growing admiration, "to attempt to describe her figure would be utterly useless, because I am a practical man and not a poet, nor do I read poetry or indulge in futile novels or romances of any description. Therefore I can only add that it was a figure, a poise, absolutely faultless, youthful, beautiful, erect, wholesome, gracious, graceful, charmingly buoyant and—well, I cannot describe her figure, and I shall not try."

"Exactly; don't try."

"No," said Harren mournfully, "it is useless"; and he relapsed into enchanted retrospection.

"Who was she?" asked Mr. Keen softly.

"I don't know."

"You never again saw her?"

"Mr. Keen, I—I am not ill-bred, but I simply could not help following her. She was so b-b-beautiful that it hurt; and I only wanted to look at her; I didn't mind being hurt. So I walked on and on, and sometimes I'd pass her and sometimes I'd let her pass me, and when she wasn't looking I'd look—not offensively, but just because I *couldn't* help it. And all the time my senses were humming like a top and my heart kept jumping to get into my throat, and I hadn't a notion where I was going or what time it was or what day of the week. She didn't see me; she didn't dream that I

was looking at her; she didn't know me from any of the thousand silk-hatted, frock-coated men who passed and repassed her on Fifth Avenue. And when she went into St. Berold's Church, I went, too, and I stood where I could see her and where she couldn't see me. It was like a touch of the Luzon sun, Mr. Keen. And then she came out and got into a Fifth Avenue stage, and I got in, too. And whenever she looked away I looked at her—without the slightest offense, Mr. Keen, until, once, she caught my eye—”

He passed an unsteady hand over his forehead.

“For a moment we looked full at one another,” he continued. “I got red, sir; I felt it, and I couldn't look away. And when I turned color like a blooming beet, she began to turn pink like a rose-bud, and she looked full into my eyes with such a wonderful purity, such exquisite innocence, that I—I never felt so near—er—heaven in my life! No, sir, not even when they ambushed us at Manoa Wells—but that's another thing—only it is part of this business.”

He tightened his clasped hands over his knee until the knuckles whitened.

“That's my story, Mr. Keen,” he said crisply.

“All of it?”

Harren looked at the floor, then at Keen: “No, not all. You'll think me a lunatic if I tell you all.”

“Oh, you saw her again?”

“N-never! That is—”

“Never?”

“Not in—in the flesh.”

“Oh, in dreams?”

Harren stirred uneasily. “I don't know what you call them. I have seen her since—in the sunlight, in the open, in my quarters in Manila, standing there perfectly distinct, looking at me with such strange, beautiful eyes—”

“Go on,” said the Tracer, nodding.

“What else is there to say?” muttered Harren.

“You saw her—or a phantom which resembled her. Did she speak?”

“No.”

“Did you speak to her?”

“N-no. Once I held out my—my arms.”

“What happened?”

“She wasn't there,” said Harren simply.

“She vanished?”

“No—I don't know. I—I didn't see her any more.”

"Didn't she fade?"

"No. I can't explain. She—there was only myself in the room."

"How many times has she appeared to you?"

"A great many times."

"In your room?"

"Yes. And in the road under a vertical sun; in the forest, in the paddy fields. I have seen her passing through the hallway of a friend's house—turning on the stair to look back at me! I saw her standing just back of the firing line at Manoa Wells when we were preparing to rush the forts, and it scared me so that I jumped forward to draw her back. But—she wasn't there, Mr. Keen. . . .

"On the transport she stood facing me on deck one moonlit evening for five minutes. I saw her in 'Frisco; she sat in the Pullman twice between Denver and this city. Twice in my room at the Vice-Regent she has sat opposite me at midday, so clear, so beautiful, so real that—that I could scarcely believe she was only a—a—" He hesitated.

"The apparition of her own subconscious self," said the Tracer quietly. "Science has been forced to admit such things, and, as you know, we are on the verge of understanding the alphabet of some of the unknown forces which we must some day reckon with."

Harren, tense, a trifle pale, gazed at him earnestly.

"Do you believe in such things?"

"How can I avoid believing?" said the Tracer. "Every day, in my profession, we have proof of the existence of forces for which we have as yet no explanation—or, at best, a very crude one. I have had case after case of premonition; case after case of dual and even multiple personality; case after case where apparitions played a vital part in the plot which was brought to me to investigate. I'll tell you this, captain: I, personally, never saw an apparition, never was obsessed by premonitions, never received any communications from the outer void. But I have had to do with those who undoubtedly did. Therefore I listen with all seriousness and respect to what you tell me."

"Suppose," said Harren, growing suddenly red, "that I should tell you I have succeeded in photographing this phantom."

The Tracer sat silent. He was astounded, but he did not betray it.

"You have that photograph, Captain Harren?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"In my rooms."

"You wish me to see it?"

Harren hesitated. "I—there is—seems to be—something almost sacred to me in that photograph. . . . You understand me, do you not? Yet, if it will help in finding her—"

"Oh," said the Tracer in guileless astonishment, "you desire to find this young lady. Why?"

Harren stared. "Why? Why do I want to find her? Man, I—I can't live without her!"

"I thought you were not certain whether you really could be in love."

The hot color in the captain's bronzed cheeks mounted to his hair.

"Exactly," purred the Tracer, looking out of the window. "Suppose we walk around to your rooms after luncheon. Shall we?"

Harren picked up his hat and gloves, hesitating, lingering on the threshold. "You *don't* think she is—a—dead?" he asked unsteadily.

"No," said Mr. Keen, "I don't."

"Because," said Harren wistfully, "her apparition is so superbly healthy and—and glowing with youth and life—"

"That is probably what sent it half the world over to confront you," said the Tracer gravely; "youth and life aglow with spiritual health. I think, captain, that she has been seeing you, too, during these three years, but probably only in her dreams—memories of your encounters with her subconscious self floating over continents and oceans in a quest of which her waking intelligence is innocently unaware."

The captain colored like a schoolboy, lingering at the door, hat in hand. Then he straightened up to the full height of his slim but powerful figure.

"At three?" he inquired bluntly.

"At three o'clock in your room, Hotel Vice-Regent. Good morning, captain."

"Good morning," said Harren dreamily, and walked away, head bent, gray eyes lost in retrospection, and on his lean, bronzed, attractive face an afterglow of color wholly becoming.

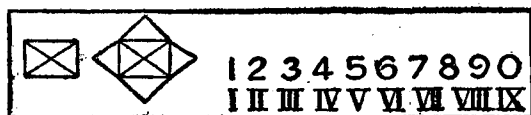
When the Tracer of Lost Persons entered Captain Harren's room at the Hotel Vice-Regent that afternoon he found the young man standing at a center table, pencil in hand, studying a sheet of paper which was covered with letters and figures.

The two men eyed one another in silence for a moment, then

Harren pointed grimly to the confusion of letters and figures covering dozens of scattered sheets lying on the table.

"That's part of my madness," he said with a short laugh. "Can you make anything of such lunatic work?"

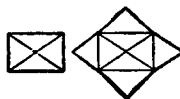
The Tracer picked up a sheet of paper covered with letters of the alphabet and Roman and Arabic numerals. He dropped it presently and picked up another comparatively blank sheet, on which were the following figures:



He studied it for a while, then glanced interrogatively at Harren.

"It's nothing," said Harren. "I've been groping for three years—but it's no use. That's lunatics' work." He wheeled squarely on his heels, looking straight at the Tracer. "Do you think I've had a touch of the sun?"

"No," said Mr. Keen, drawing a chair to the table. "Saner men than you or I have spent a lifetime over this so-called Seal of Solomon." He laid his finger on the two symbols—



Then, looking across the table at Harren: "What," he asked, "has the Seal of Solomon to do with your case?"

"She—" muttered Harren, and fell silent.

The Tracer waited; Harren said nothing.

"Where is the photograph?"

Harren unlocked a drawer in the table, hesitated, looked strangely at the Tracer.

"Mr. Keen," he said, "there is nothing on earth I hold more sacred than this. There is only one thing in the world that could justify me in showing it to a living soul—my—my desire to find—her—"

"No," said Keen coolly, "that is not enough to justify you—the mere desire to find the living original of this apparition. Nothing could justify your showing it unless you love her."

Harren held the picture tightly, staring full at the Tracer. A dull flush mounted to his forehead, and very slowly he laid the picture before the Tracer of Lost Persons.

Minute after minute sped while the Tracer bent above the photograph, his finely molded features absolutely devoid of expression. Harren had drawn his chair beside him, and now sat leaning forward, bronzed cheek resting in his hand, staring fixedly at the picture.

"When was this—this photograph taken?" asked the Tracer quietly.

"The day after I arrived in New York. I was here, alone, smoking my pipe and glancing over the evening paper just before dressing for dinner. It was growing rather dark in the room; I had not turned on the electric light. My camera lay on the table—there it is!—that Kodak. I had taken a few snapshots on shipboard; there was one film left."

He leaned more heavily on his elbow, eyes fixed upon the picture.

"It was almost dark," he repeated. "I laid aside the evening paper and stood up, thinking about dressing for dinner; when my eyes happened to fall on the camera. It occurred to me that I might as well unload it, let the unused film go, and send the roll to be developed and printed; and I picked up the camera—"

"Yes," said the Tracer softly.

"I picked it up and was starting toward the window where there remained enough daylight to see by—"

The Tracer nodded gently.

"Then I saw *her*!" said Harren under his breath.

"Where?"

"There—standing by that window. You can see the window and curtain in the photograph."

The Tracer gazed intently at the picture.

"She looked at me," said Harren, steadying his voice. "She was as real as you are, and she stood there, smiling faintly, her dark, lovely eyes meeting mine."

"Did you speak?"

"No."

"How long did she remain there?"

"I don't know—time seemed to stop—the world—everything grew still. . . . Then, little by little, something began to stir, under my stunned senses—that germ of misgiving, that dreadful doubt of my own sanity. . . . I scarcely knew what I was doing when I took the photograph; besides, it had grown quite dark, and I could

scarcely see her." He drew himself erect with a nervous movement. "How on earth could I have obtained that photograph of her in the darkness?" he demanded.

"N-rays," said the Tracer coolly. "It has been done in France."

"Yes, from living people, but—"

"What the N-ray is in living organisms, we must call, for lack of a better term, the subaura in the phantom."

They bent over the photograph together. Presently the Tracer said: "She is very, very beautiful?"

Harren's dry lips unclosed, but he uttered no sound.

"She is beautiful, is she not?" repeated the Tracer, turning to look at the young man.

"Can you not see she is?" he asked impatiently.

"No," said the Tracer.

Harren stared at him.

"Captain Harren," continued the Tracer, "I can see nothing upon this bit of paper that resembles in the remotest degree a human face or figure."

Harren turned white.

"Not that I doubt that *you* can see it," pursued the Tracer calmly. "I simply repeat that I see absolutely nothing on this paper except a part of a curtain, a window pane, and—and—"

"What! For God's sake!" cried Harren hoarsely.

"I don't know yet. Wait; let me study it."

"Can you not see her face, her eyes? *Don't* you see that exquisite slim figure standing there by the curtain?" demanded Harren, laying his shaking finger on the photograph. "Why, man, it is as clear, as clean cut, as distinct as though the picture had been taken in sunlight! Do you mean to say that there is nothing there—that I am crazy?"

"No. Wait."

"Wait! How can I wait when you sit staring at her picture and telling me that you can't see it, but that it is doubtless there? Are you deceiving me, Mr. Keen? Are you trying to humor me, trying to be kind to me, knowing all the while that I'm crazy—"

"Wait, man! You are no more crazy than I am. I tell you that I can see something on the window pane—"

He suddenly sprang up and walked to the window, leaning close and examining the glass. Harren followed and laid his hand lightly over the pane.

"Do you see any marks on the glass?" demanded Keen.

Harren shook his head.

"Have you a magnifying glass?" asked the Tracer.

Harren pointed back to the table, and they returned to the photograph, the Tracer bending over it and examining it through the glass.

"All I see," he said, still studying the photograph, "is a corner of a curtain and a window on which certain figures seem to have been cut. . . . Look, Captain Harren, can you see them?"

"I see some marks—some squares."

"You can't see anything written on that pane—as though cut by a diamond?"

"Nothing distinct."

"But you see *her*?"

"Perfectly."

"In minute detail?"

"Yes."

The Tracer thought a moment: "Does she wear a ring?"

"Yes; can't you see?"

"Draw it for me."

They seated themselves side by side, and Harren drew a rough sketch of the ring which he insisted was so plainly visible on her hand:



"Oh," observed the Tracer, "she wears the Seal of Solomon on her ring."

Harren looked up at him. "That symbol has haunted me persistently for three years," he said. "I have found it everywhere—on articles that I buy, on house furniture, on the belts of dead ladrones, on the hilts of creeses, on the funnels of steamers, on the headstalls of horses. If they put a laundry mark on my linen it's certain to be this!



If I buy a box of matches the sign is on it. Why, I've even seen it on the brilliant wings of tropical insects. It's got on my nerves. I dream about it."

"And you buy books about it and try to work out its mystical meaning?" suggested the Tracer, smiling.

But Harren's gray eyes were serious. He said: "*She* never comes to me without that symbol somewhere about her. . . . I told you she never spoke to me. That is true; yet once, in a vivid dream of her, she did speak. I—I was almost ashamed to tell you of that."

"Tell me."

"A—a dream? Do you wish to know what I dreamed?"

"Yes—if it was a dream."

"It was. I was asleep on the deck of the *Mindanao*, dead tired after a fruitless hike. I dreamed she came toward me through a young woodland all lighted by the sun, and in her hands she held masses of that wildflower we call Solomon's Seal. And she said—in the voice I know must be like hers: 'If you could only read! If you would only understand the message I send you! It is everywhere on earth for you to read, if you only would!'

"I said: 'Is the message in the seal? Is that the key to it?'

"She nodded, laughing, burying her face in the flowers, and said:

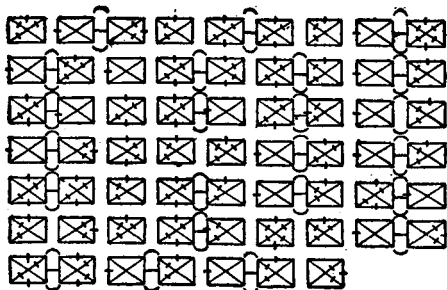
"'Perhaps I can write it more plainly for you someday; I will try very, very hard.'"

"And after that she went away—not swiftly—for I saw her at moments far away in the woods; but I must have confused her with the glimmering shafts of sunlight, and in a little while the woodland grew dark and I woke with the racket of a Colt's automatic in my ears."

He passed his sun-bronzed hand over his face, hesitated, then leaned over the photograph once more, which the Tracer was studying intently through the magnifying glass.

"There is something on that window in the photograph which I'm going to copy," he said. "Please shove a pad and pencil toward me."

Still examining the photograph through the glass which he held in his right hand, Mr. Keen picked up the pencil and, feeling for the pad, began very slowly to form the following series of symbols:



"What on earth are you doing?" muttered Captain Harren, twisting his short mustache in perplexity.

"I am copying what I see through this magnifying glass written on the window pane in the photograph," said the Tracer calmly. "Can't you see those marks?"

"I—I do now; I never noticed them before particularly—only that there were scratches there."

When at length the Tracer had finished his work he sat, chin on hand, examining it in silence. Presently he turned toward Harren, smiling.

"Well?" inquired the younger man impatiently. "Do those scratches representing Solomon's Seal mean anything?"

"It's the strangest cipher I ever encountered," said Mr. Keen—"the strangest I ever heard of. I have seen hundreds of ciphers—hundreds—secret codes of the State Department, secret military codes, elaborate Oriental ciphers, symbols used in commercial transactions, symbols used by criminals and every species of malfactor. And every one of them can be solved with time and patience and a little knowledge of the subject. But this—" he sat looking at it with eyes half closed "—this is *too* simple."

"Simple!"

"Very. It's so simple that it's baffling."

"Do you mean to say you are going to be able to find a meaning in squares and crosses?"

"I—I don't believe it is going to be so very difficult to translate them."

"Great guns!" said the captain. "Do you mean to say that you can ultimately translate that cipher?"

The Tracer smiled. "Let's examine it for repetitions first. Here we have this symbol



repeated five times. It's likely to be the letter E. I think—" His voice ceased; for a quarter of an hour he pored over the symbols, pencil in hand, checking off some, substituting a letter here and there.

"No," he said; "the usual doesn't work in this case. It's an absurdly simple cipher. I have a notion that numbers play a part in it—you see where these crossed squares are bracketed—those must be numbers requiring two figures—"

He fell silent again, and for another quarter of an hour he re-

mained motionless, immersed in the problem before him, Harren frowning at the paper over his shoulder.

"Come!" said the Tracer suddenly; "this won't do. There are too few symbols to give us a key; too few repetitions to furnish us with any key basis. Come, captain, let us use our intellects; let us talk it over with that paper lying there between us. It's a simple cipher—a childishly simple one if we use our wits. Now, sir, what I see repeated before us on this sheet of paper is merely one of the forms of a symbol known as Solomon's Seal. The symbol is, as we see, repeated a great many times. Every seal



has been dotted or crossed on some one of the lines composing it; some seals are coupled with brackets and armatures."

"What of it?" inquired Harren vacantly.

"Well, sir, in the first place, that symbol



is supposed to represent the spiritual and material, as you know. What else do you know about it?"

"Nothing. I bought a book about it, but made nothing of it."


"Isn't it supposed," asked Mr. Keen, "to contain within itself the nine numerals, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and even the zero symbol?"


"I believe so."


"Exactly. Here's the seal



Now I'll mark the one, two, and three by crossing the lines, like this:

one, 

two, 

three, 

Now, eliminating all lines not crossed there remains

the one, **1**

the two, **2**

the three, **3**

And here is the entire series: 12 34 56789

and the zero—▷ ”

A sudden excitement stirred Harren; he leaned over the paper, gazing earnestly at the cipher; the Tracer rose and glanced around the room as though in search of something.

“Is there a telephone here?” he asked.

“For Heaven’s sake, don’t give this up just yet,” exclaimed Harren. “These things mean numbers; don’t you see? Look at that!” pointing to a linked pair of seals,



“That means the number nineteen! You can form it by using only the crossed lines of the seal



Don’t you see, Mr. Keen?”

“Yes, Captain Harren, the cipher is, as you say, very plain; quite as easy to read as so much handwriting. That is why I wish to use your telephone—at once, if you please.”

“It’s in my bedroom; you don’t mind if I go on working out this cipher while you’re telephoning?”

“Not in the least,” said the Tracer blandly. He walked into the captain’s bedroom, closing the door behind him; then he stepped over to the telephone, unhooked the receiver, and called up his own headquarters.

“Hello. This is Mr. Keen. I want to speak to Miss Borrow.”

In a few moments Miss Borrow answered: “I am here, Mr. Keen.”

“Good. Look up the name Inwood. Try New York first—Edith Inwood is the name. Look sharp, please; I am holding the wire.”

He held it for ten full minutes; then Miss Borrow’s low voice called him over the wire.

“Go ahead,” said the Tracer quietly.

“There is only one Edith Inwood in New York, Mr. Keen—Miss Edith Inwood, graduate of Barnard, 1902—left an orphan 1903 and obliged to support herself—became an assistant to Professor Boggs of the Museum of Inscriptions. Is considered an authority upon

Arabian cryptograms. Has written a monograph on the Herati symbol—a short treatise on the swastika. She is twenty-four years of age. Do you require further details?"

"No," said the Tracer; "please ring off."

Then he called up General Information. "I want the Museum of Inscriptions. Get me their number, please." After a moment: "Is this the Museum of Inscriptions?"

"Is Professor Boggs there?"

"Is this Professor Boggs?"

"Could you find time to decipher an inscription for me at once?"

"Of course I know you are extremely busy, but have you no assistant who could do it?"

"What did you say her name is? Miss Inwood?"

"Oh! And will the young lady translate the inscription at once if I send a copy of it to her by messenger?"

"Thank you very much, professor. I will send a messenger to Miss Inwood with a copy of the inscription. Goodbye."

He hung up the receiver, turned thoughtfully, opened the door again, and walked into the sunlit living room.

"Look here!" cried the captain in a high state of excitement. "I've got a lot of numbers out of it already."

"Wonderful!" murmured the Tracer, looking over the young man's broad shoulders at a sheet of paper bearing these numbers:

9—14—5—22—5—18—19—1—23—25—15—21—2—21—20—
15—14—3—5—9—12—15—22—5—25—15—21—5—4—9—20
—8—9—14—23—15—15—4.

"Marvelous!" repeated the Tracer, smiling. "Now what *do* you suppose those numbers can stand for?"

"Letters!" announced the captain triumphantly. "Take the number nine, for example. The ninth letter in the alphabet is I! Mr. Keen, suppose we try writing down the letters according to that system!"

"Suppose we do," agreed the Tracer gravely.

So, counting under his breath, the young man set down the letters in the following order, not attempting to group them into words:

INEVERSAWYOUBUTONCEILOVEYOUEDITHINWOOD.

Then he leaned back, excited, triumphant.

"There you are!" he said; "only, of course, it makes no sense."

He examined it in silence, and gradually a hopeless expression effaced the animation. "How the deuce am I going to separate that mass of letter into words?" he muttered.

"This way," said the Tracer, smilingly taking the pencil from his fingers, and he wrote: I — NEVER — SAW — YOU — BUT — ONCE. I — LOVE — YOU. EDITH INWOOD.

Then he laid the pencil on the table and walked to the window.

Once or twice he fancied that he heard incoherent sounds behind him. And after a while he turned, retracing his steps leisurely. Captain Harren, extremely pink, stood, tugging at his short mustache and studying the papers on the desk.

"Well?" inquired the Tracer, amused.

The young man pointed to the translation with unsteady finger. "W-what on earth does that mean?" he demanded shakily. "Who is Edith Inwood? W-what on earth does that cryptogram mean on the window pane in the photograph? How did it come there? It isn't on my window pane, you see!"

The Tracer said quietly: "That is not a photograph of your window."

"What!"

"No, captain. Here! Look at it closely through this glass. There are sixteen small panes in that sash; now count the panes in your window—eight! Besides, look at that curtain. It is made of some figured stuff like chintz. Now, look at your own curtain yonder! It is of plain velour."

"But—but I took that photograph! She stood there—there by that very window!"

The Tracer leaned over the photograph, examining it through the glass. And, studying it, he said: "Do you still see *her* in this photograph, Captain Harren?"

"Certainly. Can you not see her?"

"No," murmured the Tracer, "but I see the window which she really stood by when her phantom came here seeking you. And that is sufficient. Come, Captain Harren, we are going out together."

The captain looked at him earnestly; something in Mr. Keen's eyes seemed to fascinate him.

"You think that—that it's likely we are g-going to see—*her*!" he faltered.

"If I were you," mused the Tracer of Lost Persons, joining the tips of his lean fingers meditatively. "If I were you I should wear a silk hat and a frock coat. It's—it's afternoon, anyhow," he added

deprecatingly, "and we are liable to make a call."

Captain Harren turned like a man in a dream and entered his bedroom. And when he emerged he was dressed and groomed with pathetic precision.

"Mr. Keen," he said, "I—I don't know why I am d-daring to hope for all s-sorts of things. Nothing you have said really warrants it. But somehow I'm venturing to cherish an absurd notion that I may s-see her."

"Perhaps," said the Tracer, smiling.

"Mr. Keen! You wouldn't say that if—if there was no chance, would you? You wouldn't dash a fellow's hopes—"

"No, I wouldn't," said Mr. Keen. "I tell you frankly that I expect to find her."

"Today?"

"We'll see," said Mr. Keen guardedly. "Come, captain, don't look that way! Courage, sir! We are about to execute a turning movement; but you look like a Russian general on his way to the south front."

Harren managed to laugh; they went out, side by side, descended the elevator, and found a cab at the *porte-cochère*. Mr. Keen gave the directions and followed the captain into the cab.

"Now," he said, as they wheeled south, "we are first going to visit the Museum of Inscriptions and have this cipher translation verified. Here is the cipher as I copied it. Hold it tightly, captain; we've only a few blocks to drive."

Indeed they were already nearly there. The hansom drew up in front of a plain granite building wedged in between some rather elaborate private dwelling houses. Over the door were letters of dull bronze:

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF INSCRIPTIONS

and the two men descended and entered a wide marble hall lined with glass-covered cabinets containing plaster casts of various ancient inscriptions and a few bronze and marble originals. Several female frumps were nosing the exhibits.

An attendant in livery stood in the middle distance. The Tracer walked over to him. "I have an appointment to consult Miss Inwood," he whispered.

"This way, sir," nodded the attendant, and the Tracer signaled the captain to follow.

They climbed several marble stairways, crossed a rotunda, and

entered a room—a sort of library. Beyond was a door which bore the inscription:

ASSISTANT CURATOR

"Now," said the Tracer of Lost Persons in a low voice to Captain Harren, "I am going to ask you to sit here for a few minutes while I interview the assistant curator. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, I don't mind," said Harren wearily, "only, when are we going to begin to search for—*her*?"

"Very soon—I may say extremely soon," said Mr. Keen gravely. "By the way, I think I'll take that sheet of paper on which I copied the cipher. Thank you. I won't be long."

The attendant had vanished. Captain Harren sat down by a window and gazed out into the late afternoon sunshine. The Tracer of Lost Persons, treading softly across the carpeted floor, approached the sanctuary, turned the handle, and walked in, carefully closing the door behind him.

There was a young girl seated at a desk by an open window; she looked up quietly as he entered, then rose leisurely.

"Miss Inwood?"

"Yes."

She was slender, dark-eyed, dark-haired—a lovely, wholesome young creature, gracious and graceful. And that was all—for the Tracer of Lost Persons could not see through the eyes of Captain Harren, and perhaps that is why he was not able to discern a miracle of beauty in the pretty girl who confronted him—no magic and matchless marvel of transcendent loveliness—only a quiet, sweet-faced, dark-eyed young girl whose features and figure were attractive in the manner that youth is always attractive. But then it is a gift of the gods to see through eyes anointed by the gods.

The Tracer touched his gray mustache and bowed; the girl bowed very sweetly.

"You are Mr. Keen," she said; "you have an inscription for me to translate."

"A mystery for young eyes to interpret," he said, smiling. "May I sit here—and tell my story before I show you my inscription?"

"Please do," she said, seating herself at her desk and facing him, one slender white hand supporting the oval of her face.

The Tracer drew his chair a little forward. "It is a curious matter," he said. "May I give you a brief outline of the details?"

"By all means, Mr. Keen."

"Then let me begin by saying that the inscription of which I have a copy was probably scratched upon a window pane by means of a diamond."

"Oh! Then—then it is not an ancient inscription, Mr. Keen."

"The theme is ancient—the oldest theme in the world—love! The cipher is old—as old as King Solomon." She looked up quickly. The Tracer, apparently engrossed in his own story, went on with it. "Three years ago the young girl who wrote this inscription upon the window pane of her—her bedroom, I think it was—fell in love. Do you follow me, Miss Inwood?"

Miss Inwood sat very still—wide, dark eyes fixed on him.

"Fell in love," repeated the Tracer musingly, "not in the ordinary way. That is the point, you see. No, she fell in love at first sight; fell in love with a young man she never before had seen, never again beheld—and never forgot. Do you still follow me, Miss Inwood?"

She made the slightest motion with her lips.

"No," mused the Tracer of Lost Persons, "she never forgot him. I am not sure, but I think she sometimes dreamed of him. She dreamed of him awake, too. Once she inscribed a message to him, cutting it with the diamond in her ring on the window pane—"

A slight sound escaped from Miss Inwood's lips. "I beg your pardon," said the Tracer, "did you say something?"

The girl had risen, pale, astounded, incredulous.

"Who are you?" she faltered. "What has this—this story to do with me?"

"Child," said the Tracer of Lost Persons, "the Seal of Solomon is a splendid mystery. All of heaven and earth are included within its symbol. And more, more than you dream of, more than I dare fathom; and I am an old man, my child—old, alone, with nobody to fear for, nothing to dread, not even the end of all—because I am ready for that, too. Yet I, having nothing on earth to dread, dare not fathom what that symbol may mean, nor what vast powers it may exert on life. God knows. It may be the very signet of Fate itself; the sign manual of Destiny."

He drew the paper from his pocket, unrolled it, and spread it out under her frightened eyes.

"*That!*" she whispered, steadying herself blindly against the arm he offered. She stood a moment so, then, shuddering, covered her eyes with both hands. The Tracer of Lost Persons looked at her, turned and opened the door.

"Captain Harren!" he called quietly. Harren, pacing the ante-

room, turned and came forward. As he entered the door he caught sight of the girl crouching by the window, her face hidden in her hands, and at the same moment she dropped her hands and looked straight at him.

"You!" she gasped.

The Tracer of Lost Persons stepped out, closing the door. For a moment he stood there, tall, gaunt, gray, staring vacantly into space.

"She *was* beautiful—when she looked at him," he muttered.

For another minute he stood there, hesitating, glancing backward at the closed door. Then he went away, stooping slightly, his top hat held close against the breast of his tightly buttoned frock coat.

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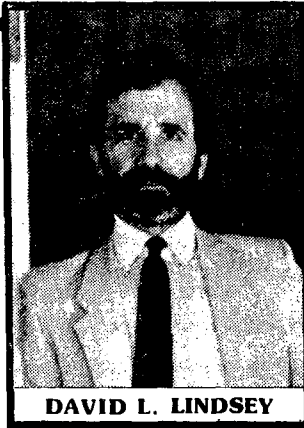
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DAVID L. LINDSEY

Stuart Haydon comes from a wealthy family; his father made his money as a lawyer for the oil industry in Britain, Mexico, and Houston in the thirties and forties. He lives in a luxurious estate in Houston, Texas, with his architect wife Nina, the family maid Gabriella, and an old colie, Cinco. He drives a Jaguar and wears custom-tailored clothing. He collects fine art, books, and bromeliads. He is a very private man who refuses to have his picture taken, to be interviewed in connection with a case, or even to be mentioned in the papers in connection with a case. All the suspects and witnesses know immediately when they see Haydon that he is not an ordinary cop.

Indeed he is not. Like many of the "new breed" of policemen now being written about in mystery fiction, Stuart Haydon is moody—but only his wife knows *how* moody. He disappears periodically, with no warning, and after two or three days returns, gaunt, bedraggled, and exhausted. Nina covers for him with the office, telling them that Stuart has the flu, so when he finally does report to work, his thin and worn appearance seems natural. His partners and his best friend in the department, Lieutenant Dystal, suspect there is something wrong, but they never catch on to the true nature of Stuart's illness. Stuart sees "ghosts"—at the most inopportune times—of the vic-

tims in the cases he has worked on. He will be talking to a witness or a friend and that individual will take on the aspect of the victim in Stuart's eyes. After a period of time, this becomes too much for him and he has a "little nervous breakdown."

Stuart Haydon knows that being a policeman is bad for his health. At the same time he takes and retakes the lieutenant's exam and passes it at the top each time. Each time he is offered a promotion he turns it down, even though becoming an administrator might ease the frequency and degree of the breakdowns. He just "controls" them. The department is beginning to feel that this superficially arrogant, rich cop who shouldn't have to work for a living is just playing at the job, and he may never get another offer of promotion. This worries Dystal, who would like to see his friend, however odd, get ahead in the department. And of course Nina would like to see Stuart take the promotion and get off the streets. She's afraid these breakdowns endanger his ability to concentrate, and therefore physically endanger him on the job.

In David L. Lindsey's series about this Houston homicide cop who gets so involved in his work, the city of Houston is a co-star. The details of the city

setting are so accurate that the reader can follow Haydon's investigations with a city map. Only the names of shops have been changed. Lindsey's settings are mini-snapshots of actual places in the city, primarily inside the Loop (Interstate 610), but the background landscape isn't shown. That the reader has to put in, and that, I suspect, can't be done if you have never been to Houston. After all, Houston is different from any other city in this country—both in its international flavor and its Texas roots.

There are four books so far in the series, each of which follows a crime from the multiple points of view of the police and the perpetrator. And each explores a different culture and its related political background in Houston. *A Cold Mind* (Harper & Row, 1983; Pocket, 1984) investigates a serial killer who is intricately tied up with drugs, Brazilian music clubs, and the Texas Medical Center. *Heat from Another Sun* (Harper & Row, 1984; Pocket, 1985) centers on the black and Chinese ghettos; violent pornography, and multinational corporations. *Spiral* (Atheneum, 1986; Pocket, 1988) deals with a right-wing Mexican terrorist organization called *los tecos*, interrelationships between rich Mexican emigres and the Mexican *barrios* in Houston, and

the University of Houston. Only in *In the Lake of the Moon* (Atheneum, 1988, \$17.95, 341 pp) does Haydon venture more than two miles outside the Loop. In this book, nominated for an Edgar for Best Novel of 1988, we learn more about Haydon's family background as he investigates a psychopathic killer who is, in turn, tracking him. Haydon follows the killer, only too aware of the killer's plans for him but unable to extricate himself from them, to Mexico City; half of *In the Lake of the Moon* takes place there.

I suppose that technically this is a police procedural series, but Haydon is so irregular in following the rules that I suspect in the real Houston Police Department he would be consid-

ered a "rogue." I would describe the series more as a psychological study of a policeman who is so good at his job that he can climb inside the mind of the criminal. The problem is that he is fragile psychologically, and the criminals are so very brutal—he often cannot escape from the case when he is off duty or even after he has solved it. So he carries ghosts of the cases around with him until he breaks.

I would recommend the series to readers who like (1) the new breed of police "thrillers" in which the author puts you inside the head of the policeman or the criminal, or (2) regional American mysteries, where setting is important to the story line.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Oriana Papazoglou's romance-writer-turned-true-crime-chronicler, Patience McKenna, returns in **Rich, Radiant Slaughter** (Doubleday, \$12.95, 181 pp) when a very unpleasant woman is found dead under the table where McKenna is signing books. She is just coming to the end of a tiring tour with several other authors, the proceeds of which are to be donated to a charity beloved by her publicist and the promoter of the tour. The killing, set in Gail Larson's The Butler Did It bookstore in Baltimore, is just the first in what appears to be a series which can only have been committed by one of the tour members. McKenna deals with the murders, the apparent pregnancy of her best friend, and some strange audits from the IRS in her usual reckless manner, getting banged around a bit in the process. But like the other books in this series, the read is humorous and engaging as well as mysterious.

Peter Israel has given us a Nero-Wolfe/Archie Goodwin-like pair of detectives in his new series, which currently consists of **I'll Cry When I Kill You** (Mysterious Press, \$3.95, 264 pp) and **If I Should Die Before I Die** (Mysterious Press, \$17.95, 291 pp.). Counselor Charles Camelot lives in a five story house in New York City, which comprises his office suite on the first two floors and his (and his wife, Nora's) residence on the top three. His aide is Phil Revere (née Pablo Evaristo Maria Rivera), who narrates and investigates for the Counselor. The Counselor is not as housebound as Wolfe, nor is he as corpulent or phobic about women. But he does have many idiosyncrasies which both irritate and amuse Revere, a lawyer who never passed the bar and who investigates sans a P.I. license. *I'll Cry When I Kill You* concerns threats on the life of a famous Golden Age science fiction writer; the setting is the special convention held to celebrate that writer/recluse's eightieth birthday. He is indeed killed, and Revere, assigned to protect the writer, is the prime suspect. The background of the convention and the stories about actual science fiction writers add to the atmosphere in this mystery. In *If I Should Die Before I Die*, a serial killer is terrorizing New York while Revere is assisting the Counselor in a major business takeover and a challenge to a will. The two cases become intertwined when Revere takes on an investigation for Nora without the Counselor's knowledge, an investigation that involves one of Nora's patients (she is a sex therapist/psychologist who has a private practice as well as a famous television program). Both are well-written, fast reads with interesting character development of Revere, the Counselor, Nora, and the other members of the Counselor's firm. Recommended for those who miss Nero and Archie.

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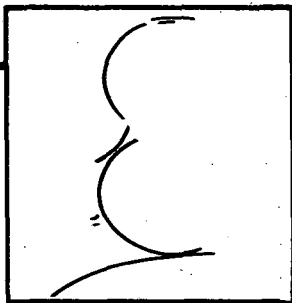
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Nobuko Miyamoto and Teppi Onizawa in *A Taxing Woman's Return*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Perhaps the best-known Japanese film detective is Mr. Moto, played by the decidedly non-Japanese Peter Lorre. Lorre was featured as Moto in eight adventures between 1937 and 1939.

Today, Japanese writer and director Juzo Itami is bringing to the screen a real Japanese sleuth in Ryoko Itakura, a government tax inspector played by Nobuko Miyamoto, Itami's real-life wife.

Itakura was first introduced to audiences in 1987, in the critically acclaimed *A Taxing Woman*. In her second adventure we now have *A Taxing Woman's Return*.

In the first film, Itakura began as a divorcee with a small son who goes to work for the Japanese version of the IRS after the split with her husband. At first the tenacious tax woman pursues the little tax

cheats, but then she moves against the world of organized crime—yes, it exists in Japan.

In her return, the tax woman again takes on the crime bosses—one vicious old man, Teppi Onizawa (Rentaro Mikuni), in particular.

Onizawa is a man who makes money off his phony religion, which he also utilizes as a tax dodge for his other dirty businesses. Onizawa's wife, who plays the role of the Holy Matriarch of the Heaven's Path Church claims a closet full of full-length furs are bought with donations from worshipers and are therefore not taxable. "Besides," she explains when the tax auditors enter the premises, "I'm a chronic shopper."

It is the job of our hero, the diminutive, freckled-faced tax woman, to nail the Japanese crime boss, also known as the

Chief Elder, for tax evasion.

Besides the phony religion, Onizawa's principal scam is a Tokyo land deal, in which he bribes powerful politicians and harasses tenants of a building he wants to raze to clear the land for a giant, moneymaking skyscraper.

To get what he wants, our crime boss hires a gang of thugs. In a poke at Japanese society, he advises them to incorporate. The leader of this gang is the cartoonishly amusing Shorty Masa (Manasaku Fuwa), who takes his new job with the utmost seriousness, extending to his mobster wardrobe of white suit, black shirt, and white tie.

The intrepid Ryoko Itakura is more than a simple tax bureaucrat who audits books. She is a cop on the beat, a detective clinging to a big case, no matter what the odds of bringing the bad guys to justice.

Physically, Itakura and her criminal prey couldn't be more different. It's delightful to watch this straightforward young woman with a bobbed hairdo battle the lecherous old crime boss. But both believe they can get what they're going after through sheer force of will.

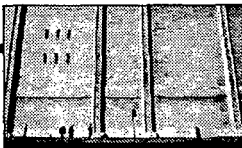
Onizawa will never change his course in his plan to build in Tokyo. "The world must come to Tokyo," he says. "But we need more offices and there's no land to build on."

Itakura will bend the rules if she has to to catch her prey. She has her partner bribe a girl in a massage parlor to get information—not exactly by-the-book government operations. And like a detective, she goes undercover, pretending to be a battered wife to gain admittance to the headquarters of Heaven's Path.

The cat-and-mouse chase continues throughout *A Taxing Woman's Return*, but Itakura's sleuthing is for the most part a simple exercise. She doggedly pursues the tax cheat with the usual detective tools of stake-out and eavesdropping.

Much of the film is concerned with Onizawa's criminal actions and motives, and our endearing tax woman unfortunately seems to play a secondary role to his. An American version of the adventures of *A Taxing Woman* might become quite popular in the U.S. This movie was in Japanese with English subtitles.

THE STORY THAT WON



The June Mysterious Photo-Becker of Aurora, Colorado. John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Illinois; Bill DeSoto of Stanley of Honolulu, Hawaii; J. C. Davis of Giant Rock, California; Lane Olinghouse of Everett, Washington; Daniel Walsh of Orange Park, Florida; M. S. Pendergrass of Morgantown, West Virginia; and Sandra Creel of Yarmouthport, Massachusetts.

graph contest was won by M. Honorable mentions go to Florida; Levi Stahl of Carmi, Plainsboro, New Jersey; Rick Stanley of Honolulu, Hawaii; J. C. Davis of Giant Rock, California; Lane Olinghouse of Everett, Washington; Daniel Walsh of Orange Park, Florida; M. S. Pendergrass of Morgantown, West Virginia; and Sandra Creel of Yarmouthport, Massachusetts.

© N. Jay Jaffe

GRAND THEFT, WINDOW by M. Becker

"Book 'em!" said Detective Mankowitz. "The charge is grand theft, window." His partner took the three men to the desk. "I'll see the captain."

As he walked through the squad room, he noticed Becker with his feet on the desk shooting paper clips out the open window. Wait till he finds out how his infantile preoccupation is nearly a thing of the past, thought Mankowitz as he knocked twice on Captain Stinser's door and walked in.

Stinser was stashing his bottle of Old Overholt in the file drawer. "Whaddya want, Mankowitz?"

"I've made an arrest."

"So, what . . ." the captain was stifling a belch from the interrupted shot of whisky.

"The window case."

In three words he had the captain's undivided attention. "Will it stick?" he asked.

"I caught 'em redhanded smuggling bricks and mortar up to the third floor."

Stinser frowned. "Sounds circumstantial. You got a motive?"

Mankowitz shuffled. "Not yet."

"Shit, Mankowitz, you find a motive or their lawyer will have us paying 'em for their damned work." He paused. "Mankowitz, you screw this up, I'll have you walking a beat."

Mankowitz walked back to the squad room and looked at the three one-eyed men and the sack of bricks, tools, and mortar now on his desk. Why had three one-eyed men conspired and nearly succeeded at bricking up every window in the new City/County Building?

Suddenly, as a paper clip caught him full force on the back of his head, he had an idea.

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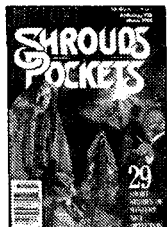


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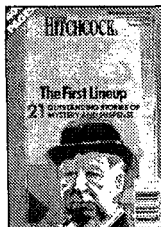
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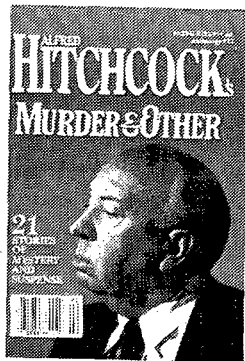
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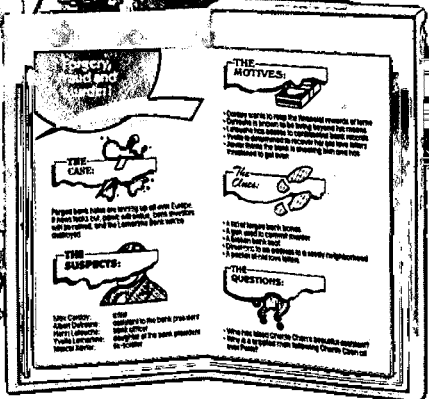
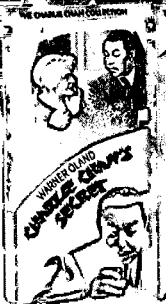
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